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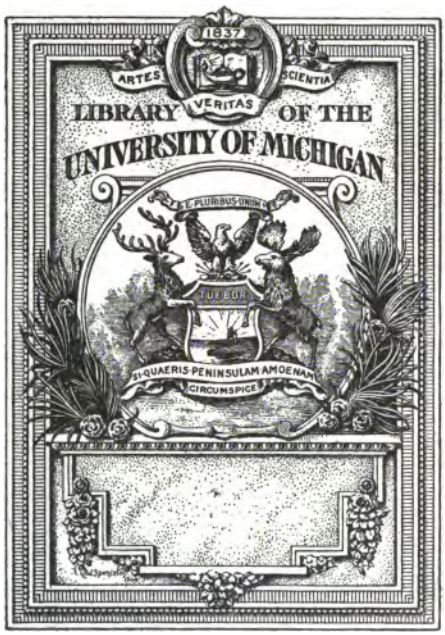
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THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE

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THE HEIR APPARENT

BY

MRS. OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF "FOR LOVE AND LIFE," "A COUNTRY GENTLEMAN," ETC. ETC.

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THE HEIR PRESUMPTIVE

AND

THE HEIR APPARENT

CHAPTER I

WHEN Agnes went upstairs after this genial but interrupted meal she was met by her sister's maid, who begged her to go at once to Lady Frogmore.

"My lady's very restless," said the attendant, who was something more than a maid, the same who had brought her home after her recovery.

"You don't think there's anything wrong?" said Agnes, breathless, for notwithstanding the tranquillity of so many years, any trifle was enough to rouse her anxieties.

"Oh, I hope not," said the maid.

This was enough, it need not be said, to

send Miss Hill trembling to her sister's side. Mary was lying very quietly in bed, with some boxes on the table beside her, and a miniature of her husband, which she always carried about with her, in her hands.

"You wanted me, Mary?"

"No," said Lady Frogmore gently; then, after a pause: "Yes; I hope you will not be disappointed, dear Agnes; I think I must go home."

"Home! but we came for Duke's party."

"I know; but I do not think I can remain any longer. Perhaps if you were to stay——"

"I will not stay if you go, Mary."

"I thought Letitia would not mind so much if one of us was here. I can't stay, I can't," said Mary, with a little sudden burst of tears. "Don't ask me. My head goes round and round——"

"No, indeed," said her sister; "no one shall ask you. I feared it might be too much; and then the tent was so hot this afternoon."

"The tent?" said Lady Frogmore, with a bewildered look. "I am not thinking of any tent. It is that the place is strange. I can't

look him in the face, Agnes. Look! don't you think he is changed? He seems to reproach me." She held the miniature out to her sister. "And I don't know what for," she cried, weeping. "If I knew what it was for I could do better. But I can't tell, I can't tell!" After a minute she dried her eyes and looked at her sister again with a faint smile. "Don't look so frightened, Agnes, as if you thought I was—silly, or something. No, I know it's only a picture. I don't mean the miniature has changed; but when I see his face in my heart he always seems to reproach me. What have I done? Oh, if I only knew what I had done!"

"Dear Mary," said Agnes, "don't trouble your mind with imaginations. It is all fancy. Do you think Frogmore, who was so fond of you, would trouble your poor innocent soul with a reproach? Oh, no, oh, no."

"I think so, too," said Mary, "but sometimes there comes a terror over me as if I had neglected something or forgotten something. If he sees us, Agnes, he must know I never meant it! He must know I never meant it! People can't grow less understanding but more understanding when they die."

"Surely," said Agnes, "don't you remember, dear, in 'In Memoriam'—'With larger, other eyes than ours'?"

"It must be so," said Mary, holding her sister's hand. "But I have such a dreadful feeling as if I had done something wrong."

"No, no, my dear; no, my poor dear."

"If I have it has been in ignorance, Agnes. I have never intended—— Look," she said, suddenly turning to the table at the bedside, "do these old things belong to me?"

Poor Agnes took this change of subject for a sign of still further derangement of her sister's troubled thoughts. She gave a slight glance at the little commonplace boxes. "Oh, my dear, don't think of such trifling things," she said.

"Agnes, look. Do they belong to me?"

"These boxes? Yes, I think so. They used to hold your work. They used to——" Then Agnes paused, for she suddenly remembered where the larger of the two, an Indian box in sandalwood, inlaid with ivory and silver, had always stood, and the last use that had been made of it. "They are not of any consequence. They can't have any-

thing to do with what we are speaking of," she said.

"You are sure they are mine?" said Mary, interrogating her face with anxious eyes.

"Oh, Mary, dear! yes, I am sure enough. They were put into a cupboard, I remember. There is a train about eleven, but perhaps to-morrow you may think differently. It will be a great disappointment for the boys."

Mary looked at her fixedly as if trying to understand. Then she said: "Tell Ford, Agnes, to pack them up. I want to look into them; perhaps there is something in them that will show—— But not here, not here!"

"It shall be just as you please," said Agnes, kissing Lady Frogmore's pale face. Ford whispered that she would not go to bed, that she did not like her lady's looks, that she would call Agnes at once in case of any need, thus securing for poor Agnes a wakeful and miserable night, as it is the habit of careful attendants to do. But it turned out that there was no occasion for this zeal. Mary slept, or at least was very quiet all the night. But she had not changed her mind in the morning.

"Don't ask me to stay," she cried, "I

can't, I can't stay." It was the morning of the ball, and the household at the Park was so much absorbed by that great event that so small a matter as the departure of a guest did not tell much. Agnes found Duke out of doors, closely attended, like his shadow, by Mar, just setting out upon some long expedition to cheat the hours until it should be time for lunch.

"The day before a ball is always such a long day," he said with simplicity. "We are going off to pass the time."

"And I am going off," said Agnes, "though not to pass the time. I am glad I have found you two to say good-bye."

"You are going away!" they both cried in consternation.

"I knew," cried Agnes, with a certain relief in expressing her feeling, "I knew it would be too much for her bringing her here. Oh, yes, it's true I was anxious to come. I wanted her to come, but I always felt it was a risk. Dear boys, I'm going to take you into my confidence. You're such friends! Thank God, you're such friends! Well, then, I may tell you, I think she is beginning to awake."

"Aunt Mary?" said Duke, with a tone of

awe. Mar said nothing, but his pale face crimsoned over, and he never took his eyes from his aunt's face.

"I think she's been in a kind of sleep all this time. Yesterday had a great effect upon her. She told me after, she had dreamed that there had been a great dinner and toasts, and one was to her old Frogmore. It has disturbed her mind, and she is going away."

"Oh," cried Duke, "that's not nice of Aunt Mary. My ball! I'll go and beg her to stay."

Mar said nothing, but kept his eyes on Agnes's face, watching her looks.

"You may go and say good-bye to her, but not Mar; and don't say anything of Mar, especially not as Frogmore. And, Mar, my dear, you must keep away. She is so much excited already. You must not show yourself. She has found some old things she had before you were born, and I think her memory is beginning to awake. But, my dear, you must keep away."

"She does not seem to notice whether I keep away or whether I show myself," said Mar. "Was ever such a thing dreamed of as

that one's mother—one's mother!—should cast one off? In all the books I have ever read there has never been anything like this."

"Do you think it is her fault?" said Agnes, with sudden anger.

"How can I tell?" cried the boy. "It is no one's fault, perhaps; but that does not make it any easier to bear."

"I could tell you whose fault it was," cried Agnes. "Oh, nothing easier; but it is not your poor mother, the unfortunate victim, who is to blame."

Mar's eyes blazed in his pale face. "Who is it? Who is it?" he cried.

"Oh, what a wicked woman I am," cried Agnes, suddenly coming to herself, "that I should try to make you hate another person who perhaps had not as bad a meaning as I think. Oh, Mar, don't let us ask whose fault it was. Pray God only that it may be coming right—that my poor Mary—— You don't love your mother, Mar."

The boy looked at her intently, keenly, with his bright, anxious eyes. He looked for a moment as if about to speak, and then turned hastily away.

"Ah, well," said Agnes, with a sigh, "perhaps it is too much to expect; but some time you will know better. She says that your father reproaches her; that his face in his picture is changed; that she has done something wrong and displeased him; but what it is she does not know. Oh, my poor Mary, my poor Mary! And there is only me to stand by her in the whole world."

Mar turned round again with his big eyes all veiled and clouded with tears. He tried to speak and could not. The boy was overwhelmed with feelings which were too strong for him, which he could not either master or understand.

"There is the carriage going to fetch her," said Agnes, "and I must go, too. Good-bye, Mar. Oh, it's a dreadful disappointment to me to go so soon, not to have any more of you. I was your mother when you were little, Mar. You were my baby, and now I don't see you from year's end to year's end. Nobody thinks it is anything to me."

"Aunt Agnes——"

"Oh, Mar, my dear, never mind me, but think sometimes of your poor mother living in

a dream and not knowing, and that she may wake up before she dies. God bless you, God bless you, my little Mar."

Mar was not to be found when Duke came back to look for him, half touched, half triumphant, having given Lady Frogmore, he thought, a few things to think of, though he had not mentioned her son. He had kept his *consigne* according to the letter of Agnes's instructions, but he had given a hint or two of some one who was waiting for him, and people whom Aunt Mary would not care to see. "I know how particular you are," the young man had said. Lady Frogmore had not seemed to understand him, but no doubt she understood him, and he hoped would feel ashamed of herself. All this he meant to pour upon Mar, to indemnify him by the fact that other people cared for him, for his mother's neglect; but Mar was nowhere to be found. He did not appear at all till late in the afternoon, when he came in very tired and pale, stumbling upstairs to the school-room so fatigued that he could scarcely drag one foot after the other. He said he had been in the woods, that he had not wanted any luncheon, that he wanted nothing now except

to lie down a little and rest, when his cousins and the servants surrounded him open-mouthed. "Oh, Mar, mamma is so angry. She will not let you come to the ball," cried Tiny; and Letty gave him a little lecture upon making everybody anxious. But the worst of all was when Letitia herself appeared with a basin of soup in her hand and wrath in her countenance.

"I did not think after all the fuss that has been made about you that you would choose this day to put us all out," she cried, "but I ought to have known that it was just the fuss and nonsense that would turn your silly head. Take this at once, and you can go to bed, for you certainly shan't come down again to-night."

"I don't want anything," said Mar, turning his head from the light.

"Take it this moment," cried Letitia; "I am not going to be trifled with. Nourishment you must have, and you shall have it so long as I am here to see after you. I have got a hundred things to do, but I shan't leave this room till you have taken it. You can do what you will with the others, but you shall not overcome me."

"Oh, take it, Mar, take it; and then we shall be by ourselves, and I will sit with you," said Tiny.

Mar was too tired almost to lift his head, but he had a forlorn sense of youthful dignity, and would not give battle over the soup. And after he had swallowed it he dozed a little, and was conscious for a time of the comforting presence of Tiny, who, indeed, did a great deal for him in staying half an hour with him when there were so many conflicting occurrences going on downstairs—the decorations of the ball-room and the laying of the long tables, and the flowers and all the preparations for the evening, which were fast turning the sober everyday house into a fairy palace. She stole away as soon as she thought he had gone to sleep, not without a struggle with her conscience, which she put to silence by asking it indignantly what good she could do to Mar when he was asleep? The boy dozed most of the evening, and when Duke and Letty rushed into the room to announce a second victory over their mother, and that he must get up directly for the ball, Mar only shook his head. He said they were to put

his windows open so that he might hear the music, and that he would go to bed. And it was thus that Mar spent the evening of the ball. He lay awake and heard the music, and wondered to himself how they were enjoying it, and if it was as beautiful as he had fancied it would be, and whether Letty was dancing all the time, and if they ever thought of him lying upstairs listening. They had all promised to come and see him from time to time, but nobody came except Tiny on her way to bed, very angry to be sent upstairs at twelve o'clock, and spoiling the effect of her toilette by her rage and her tears.

"They are going to keep it up for hours," cried Tiny, "and how is a person to sleep with all that row going on?"

It amused him faintly to see how angry Tiny was, and that she had entirely forgotten that he had already lain awake listening to it for hours that seemed to him endless. Then when fatigue began to conquer his wakefulness, and he was nearly asleep, there flashed in a brilliant couple, Letty and Duke, making a *tour de valse* in Mar's little room, and bringing him sweetmeats from the supper-

table. They did not come at the promised time, but as soon as they remembered, with the careless, frank affectionateness of brothers and sisters.

"It is nearly dawn," said Mar, lifting his dazzled eyes.

"Oh, not for hours yet," they cried, valsing off again, almost before he could say, "How beautiful you are, Letty!" It vexed the boy that she did not hear him say it, and the sound of the carriages rattling up and down the avenue kept him awake for the rest of the night. But it was no longer night; it was bright morning when the visitors went away, and the house fell into uneasy silence at last—silence that did not last long; for, of course, the servants had to be up again to put everything straight, and prepare for the needs of the new day. Poor Mar, he too had looked forward a little to the ball, to see it, and decide whether it was as fine in reality as it was in books, and to see Letty dancing, and to hear all the pleasant things that would be said of Duke. It was not so bad for him as it would have been for a girl, who would have wanted to dance and not merely to look

on; but still it was a forlorn way of spending the first night of splendour that since ever he was born had taken place in his own house.

CHAPTER II

LETITIA'S triumph and delight when she found that she was to have her ball to herself, without the presence either of Lady Frogmore, who would have made her seem second in what she called her own house, or Mar, who would have been the hero of the evening had he appeared, were great. It seemed to her too good to be true that Mary should come, giving thus her sanction and approval, and then go away, interfering with nothing; and that Mar should play into her hands, and disqualify himself by the fatigue of his long ramble, a thing which she could not have hoped for! It seemed to Mrs. Parke as if Providence had taken the matter in hand, and was fighting for her. It is easy to be pious when things go so much to one's mind, and it is always so easy to deceive one's self about the vir-

tuousness of one's aims. When a woman is scheming for her children, and their benefit, does it not seem as if the stars in their courses should fight for her? And Letitia would have indignantly flung off the charge of selfishness; was it not all for Duke?—for her husband and her children? that they should have everything they wanted and a happy life; that they should, if possible, have all the honours of the race secured to them, or at least should triumph as much as possible over the untoward accident which had alienated these honours? It was not for herself, Letitia would have said, with fine indignation—what could it matter to her? and what could it be supposed but a mother's first and highest duty to strive for the advantage of Duke?

It must not be supposed, however, that Mrs. Parke's treatment of Mar had any distinct evil intention. It was her real conviction that the boy would not live, and she dealt with him as the man in the parable dealt with the talent which was given to him to make profit of, and which he laid up in a napkin. Had she been more generously inspired she would have endeavoured, even by taking a risk, to stimulate

the forces of the delicate boy. Had he been her own son this is what she would have done; but Letitia's first thought was, not to save him, but that it might not be said he had been exposed to any danger while under her charge. She thought that she protected herself from all blame by making a hothouse plant of the boy, and shutting him up from every wind that blew. "No one can say he has not been taken every care of," she said. Should "anything happen," she, at least, would thus be free from blame. It would be known to all that she had been more careful of him than of her own—that she had not suffered the winds of heaven to visit his cheeks too roughly, that she had kept him from fatigue, from excitement, from everything calculated to hurt him. And in all this she was sincere enough. That she had also wished to ignore him, to keep him in the background, to give her own children the advantages which were meant chiefly for Mar, did not hurt her conscience. It was not for herself; she derived no benefit from the fact that Mar was not sent to school; on the contrary it was a self-denial to her, a bond preventing her from amusing herself as

she would, never leaving home except for a day or two. That it gave to Duke the principal place, and made John a much more important person in the county, were objects unconnected with Mrs. Parke's personality—then how could she be called selfish? It can never be called selfishness to strive for the pre-eminence of your husband and your child.

Thus Letitia made her conscience quite comfortable when it did by chance give her a pinch. But generally it must be said her perfect conviction that she was right, whatever she did, subdued her conscience and kept everything quiet. Of course she was right! She had a delicate boy to bring up, who everybody said would never be reared, and she took such care of him that he was never exposed to a draught, or suffered to escape from the cotton wool in which her assiduous and constant attention enveloped him. What could a woman do more? She thus put herself beyond the possibility of reproach whatever happened, while strengthening the conviction of everybody around that the young Lord Frogmore would never live to grow up; but if people chose to form that conclusion the

fault was not Letitia's. When amiable neighbours said, "If care will save him, I am sure, dear Mrs. Parke, you will do it," she shook her head again. "I do all I can," she said, "at the risk of being told I do more harm than good. Some people think I should try bracing for him—exposing him like the other children. But I think it is best to be on the safe side. I shall be blamed anyhow, whatever happens, I know," she would add with a smile. She would have convinced any one; and she did convince herself. She thought she was only angry with Mar because it was so difficult to make him take proper precautions. She was certain that she wished nothing but his good.

It may be supposed that the exhibition in the tent, the sudden surging up of Mar—the delicate boy whom nobody knew—into a distinct boyish personality, suddenly producing himself in the most attractive and characteristic way at Duke's dinner, when she intended only Duke to be thought of, was gall and bitterness to Letitia. She was almost beside herself with rage and exasperation. It had been all planned for Duke. It had been intended to give him

the aspect of the heir (which he was sure to be eventually), and if there can be supposed any more sharp deception, any more poignant disappointment than Letitia's when she saw the other boy, who was the shadow upon Duke's sunshine, the barrier to his advancement, pushed to the front, and so conducting himself there as to make it for ever impossible to speak of him as of a sick and puny child—it would be very difficult to find it. That she could have strangled Mar, and also Duke and Letty, and every one who was in the complot, in the exasperation of her soul, is not too much to say. She had to conceal this under the appearance of anxiety lest the boy should have harmed himself, and discoursed, as has been seen, on the danger of excitement for him with a bitterness and energy which went too far, and betrayed something of her real motive at least to some of her children. But that real motive was not a guilty one. It was only to keep Mar in the background and bring forward her own boy. That was all—only to make Duke first, which by an accident he was not—which he ought to be by age, the other being really no more than a child, a child to whom it was per-

nicious to be brought forward like that, to be forced out of the quiet life which was the only thing possible to him. Letitia found herself able to carry matters with a high hand, both with her conscience and those keen critics her children. Of course she was angry. It was the very worst thing that could have happened to Mar. And for his poor mother, who had fainted, what a shock!

When it happened after this that Mary fled, taking a hurried leave, excusing herself anxiously, imploring Letitia not to think her unkind, and left the course clear; and that Mar in his elation possibly after yesterday, and foolish fancy that he had emancipated himself, went and took that long walk and unfitted himself for the fatigue of the evening, Letitia's spirit, we will not say her heart, gave a bound of satisfaction. The stars in their courses were fighting for her. She was mistress of her own entertainment, undeniably the most important person, not overshadowed by the woman who never ought to have been Lady Frogmore. And when the county ladies, so many of whom had heard of it, began to talk to her of the event of yesterday, and to express their satis-

faction in hearing that her young nephew was so much stronger, and had made quite a speech and such a good impression, Letitia felt herself supported by every right feeling in the gravity with which she still continued to shake her head.

"Ah, poor Mar! yes, he did very well, poor boy, but it has cost him dear. I did not take much satisfaction in his speech, for I knew it would cost him dear."

"I suppose he is here to-night," said the great lady of the county, putting up her eyeglass and looking round her, "I want to see him if you will let me, for his father and I were great friends. I want to ask him to Highwood now he is getting old enough——"

"Oh, he is not here," said Letitia. "He is in bed with a sort of nervous attack and great weakness. I tell my Duke his cousin was not able for excitement, but it is so difficult to make boys understand."

"It was not that, mamma—it was the long walk," whispered Letty at her ear.

"I see the Miss Winfords without partners," said Mrs. Parke severely, "and shoals of young men about. Go and introduce them—you little

horror!" said the mother, the last words under her breath; and she turned again to the great county lady. "I knew," she said, "that he could not bear anything of the kind. Absolute quiet is the only thing that suits poor Mar. But my boy is very fond of him, and thinks it kindness to thrust him forward. All pure affection, but affection does just as much harm as enmity — or more sometimes." Letitia spoke with a strength of conviction which much impressed the ladies who were listening. "It is a great disappointment to us all," she said, "poor boy, that he can't be here to-night."

The same question was put to her again and again during the evening.

"Where is little Frogmore? I want to see little Frogmore. I hear he quite distinguished himself at your tenants' dinner, Parke." "What have you done with the boy? I made sure we should see him to-night." "Where is the young lord?"

These were the demands that flew about on every side.

John, carefully tutored by his wife, made an answer as much like hers as it was possible for so different a speaker to make.

"Yes, he made a famous speech. He's a fine boy, but overdid himself, and my wife has put him to bed. My wife's too careful over the boy," said John.

"Ah, it is a great responsibility to have the care of children that are not your own," said some one standing by.

"I suppose so," said Mr. Parke, smoothing his big moustache.

The responsibility would not have moved John. He would have let Mar take his chance with the rest, and made no difference; but he had been well tutored, and made to see that this would never do.

"A mother's always anxious, you know," he said. "As for me, I think it does more harm than good."

Letitia had, after much vexation, come to the conclusion that it was not a bad thing John should talk like this. It would show that there was no agreement between them for keeping Mar out of the way.

And the ball was most brilliantly successful, more successful, every one said, than any ball in the county had been for years. There was no shadow at all upon it—no reminder to the

family that they were temporary tenants, and that in a few years they would all have to retire from the scene, which they all used and rejoiced in as if it were their own.

Mrs. Parke, in the satisfaction of finding all possible rivalry absent, felt that her feet were upon her native heath as she had never done: she talked to everybody of Duke's prospects, and of the difference it made when he came home. She spoke of the younger boys who would have their own way to make, and must not think they would always have their father's house to fall back upon. She spoke of John's good intelligence with the "tenants," and how well he was getting on with the Home Farm which he had taken into his own hands. For this night only she forgot to be careful; she took the full enjoyment of the position, as if everything was her own. Nearly a dozen years she had been in the house, with full command of everything. The children had grown up in it. How could she help feeling that it was her own? She forgot all about guardians and executors, and it seemed to her for a blessed hour or two as if all difficulties had been smoothed away, and Duke was indeed the heir, and she herself all but

Lady Frogmore. Moments of intoxication will come like this in everybody's career—when we remember nothing that is against us, and are able to believe that all we wish is going to be fulfilled. It was remarked how Mrs. Parke's eyes, not bright by nature, glittered, and how her little person seemed to swell with satisfaction and pride as she moved about doing the honours.

But her aspect, I am afraid, was not regarded with sympathy by the greater part of her guests. We are all apt to believe that the outer world takes our view and regards matters from our standing-point in such a moment of triumph. But as a matter of fact that is precisely the time when it does not do so. Letitia's neighbours whispered to each other that Mrs. Parke looked as if everything belonged to her—"which it doesn't at all, you know," and talked as if her husband was the head of the house and her son the heir—"whereas, as soon as little Frogmore comes of age they must all pack off." They thought it bad taste of Letitia not to have produced the boy. "If he's as ill as that she might have had him on the sofa. He ought to have

showed for a little," they said. But Mrs. Parke was quite unconscious of their sentiments. There never had been a time in her life when she had so ignored them. Always till now she had retained a consciousness of what people would be saying. But this evening it had vanished from her mind. She was *fey*, as people say in Scotland; her prosperity had gone to her head and made her forget everything that was not delightful. Either some great and critical moment, or perhaps death itself, was in her way.

"Well," she said, when all was over, "it has gone off as I never saw anything go off before. Everything went well, the music and the floor and the supper and the temper of the people. They were all so pleasant. The old marchioness made me the prettiest of speeches. She said: 'The Park has never been so brilliant as in your time.' The young people hoped we would have one every year. I said perhaps—for after all there is nothing so easily managed as a ball when it *is* a success."

"You must remember, Letitia," said John, "that there cannot be very many years now before we've got to march out bag and baggage."

"Oh, don't speak nonsense," she cried incredulously. In the sweep of her excitement she would not receive that thought.

"But, mother, it's true," said Duke. "I've liked the ball awfully. You are one for this sort of thing; nobody can do it like you. But of course when Mar comes of age——"

"Oh, don't speak to me of Mar. He'll never come of age!" she cried in the wildness of her elated mood. There was a universal cry: "Letitia! Mother! Mamma!" in different tones of indignation and horror.

She was driven out of all sense of decorum in her heat and excitement.

"Oh, you set of fools!" Letitia said.

CHAPTER III

NEXT morning Mar, who had slept little all night, was found to be feverish and unwell, which was a state of affairs by no means unusual or alarming, but which gave to Letitia a sort of additional triumph.

"What did I say to you?" she cried. "You dragged him out of the quiet that is natural at his age and forced him to make a public appearance. You seemed quite pleased with yourselves, all of you, though I told you what would happen. And here he is in bed again, and no telling when he may be allowed to get up."

"It was the walk yesterday, mamma," said Letty, "and not sleeping, what with the noise and the music. It was not making that speech——"

"Of course, you must know best," said the

mother, "and you have favoured me with your opinion to that effect before."

"Oh, mamma, don't, please, be angry! Mar says he is quite well enough to get up. He says it is only because he didn't sleep."

"Of course, he knows best," said Letitia. "You are all so sure of your own wisdom. But I hope it will convince you that for his own interests that sort of thing must not be done."

She went away, however, without giving any distinct orders, and Mar got up. But when he was up he was giddy and "queer," so he said, and quite disposed to lie down again. The tide of life was so strong in the house with all these young people about that a delicate boy was not much remarked. Duke would rush up in the middle of his own occupation with his tennis bat still in his hand, or in his cricketing costume fresh from the village green, and say: "Hallo, Mar! no better? You must get better, old fellow, and come and have a game." And Letty came in many times a day to ask how he was getting on. "You really must be better to-morrow, Mar," she said. "Mamma puts it all down to the tenants' dinner, and

says you should not have been allowed to speak. She puts all the blame on Duke and me."

"There is no blame," said Mar; "it is only that I am such a poor creature. I am never good for anything."

"Well, you must be better to-morrow," Letty would say, and go off to her ride, or perhaps to her tennis, which she too played very well. And then Tiny would come in with her hair flying in her haste, as soon as her lessons were over.

"Are you better, Mar?"

"Oh, yes, a little; but I shall not go downstairs to-day," the boy would say, smiling at her.

"Oh, it is too tiresome," cried Tiny; "I want you to come with me and get some waterlilies out of the pond. Duke's always so busy; he will never do anything. And I want you to come down the village with me to see the man about those little dachshund puppies. It is too bad of you, Mar, to be ill now. I want you so much."

"I am very sorry, Tiny, but you see I can't help myself."

"Oh, you could if you would try hard; just put on a resolution and make up your mind, and do, do be better to-morrow!" cried Tiny with vehemence. It is to be feared that this earnestness was simply on Tiny's own account, to whom Mar was a most serviceable follower —but the boy was grateful for this vigorous demand.

"I will if I can," he said; and then Tiny flew off with her hair waving, and he remained till the next visitor arrived. To tell the truth it was rather pleasant to them all to find him there always ready to hear what they had to say; and when they expressed their impatience with his illness, or ordered him imperiously to get well, they were, though unconsciously, only half sincere.

"It's nice to have you to run to always, Mar," Tiny said, who, being the youngest, was the most unabashed in the utterance of fact. And Mar smiled and replied that it was nice to have them all coming to him.

"If I am ever dull I know I shall soon hear some one running upstairs."

"But remember," cried Tiny, "you have promised to be better to-morrow."

"Oh, yes," said Mar, "I shall be better to-morrow."

"If you don't, I heard mamma say she would send for the doctor, Mar."

"I shall be better," cried the boy. And as a matter of fact he did drag himself downstairs and got out to the avenue in a dutiful endeavour to follow Tiny to see after the dachshund puppies; but he grew so pale, and so soon found out that he could not drag one foot after the other, that a great panic arose among the young people. Duke was called from his tennis (for there were visitors that afternoon and a great game was going on) by Tiny in a voice more like that of a signalman in a gale than of a young lady.

"Duke!" she said, "Mar's fainted!" which brought Duke with a rush like a regiment of cavalry across the lawn, followed by Letty, her white dress flashing like a ray of light across the shadows. Mar fainted! They flung themselves upon him where he half sat, half lay upon a great trunk of a tree which had lain there for years overgrown with moss and lichens—the very same upon which Mary, his mother, had once thrown herself before he was born.

"No—I haven't fainted—I'm only—very tired. I'll go in again directly," said Mar.

"Oh, can't you carry him home, Duke? We'll help you. Oh, it is all my fault," cried Tiny; "if I had only known!"

"Old fellow," cried Duke, who had the tears in his eyes, "if you'll put your arms round my neck I'll carry you. I can, I can. Oh, I wish you were twice the weight."

"Don't worry him," cried Letty. "He would rather walk with your arm and mine. Oh, I did not know you were so ill, Mar!"

Here Letitia came hurrying towards them, which brought a little colour back to Mar's cheeks.

"What's the matter?" she said. "You have stopped two games, rushing off like mad creatures. Oh, I might have known it was Mar."

"The two games may go to—Bath," cried Duke, flinging away from him with disdain the racquet which he had still been holding in his hand.

"I'm quite able to walk now," said Mar. "I'll go home. Go back to your game, please. I'm not very well, Aunt Letitia. I

couldn't get on any further, and Tiny took fright; that's all."

"You can give him your arm indoors, Duke, which he never ought to have quitted. I can't conceive what he means. He is always doing something to pose as if he was not taken care of. Letty, go back to your friends—go back when I tell you! I hope I know how to manage him. You can tell the doctor to come when he has finished his game. It is a good thing he is here. Now, come along, Mar; a little energy. If you could walk so far as this coming out, you may surely get back again."

"Oh, easily," said Mar. And though it was not easy at all he accomplished it, and got back to the sofa in the school-room, where he had spent so many wistful days, putting the best face upon it that he could, and urging Duke to return to his game, which that light-hearted youth, quite reassured to see that his cousin could walk and could smile, did not hesitate to do, flying downstairs heaven knows how many steps at a time to get back to his play. The anxious group which had gathered around Mar like a whirlwind dispersed again in

the same way, relieved, and thinking no evil. Oh, yes, he was better—no worse than he often was; nothing to be frightened about.

"And now, let's finish our game," said Duke.

The robust yet careless family affection, which would have done anything for the weakling among them, left him cheerful and comforted as soon as he was "better," having no anxious thought.

And Mar was left to Letitia and her terse and unemotional questionings. It was Mrs. Parke's habit to take all his ailments as a sort of reproach to herself.

"You might have known that it was not fit for you to go out in the blazing sun," she said; "but you seem to take a pleasure in behaving as if no attention was ever paid to you."

She went and got him a cushion with her own hands, and thrust it under his head with an irritable movement, and walked up and down the room, drawing down a blind over the window which gave Mar a glimpse of the sky and green trees he loved, and putting things in order which needed no arrangement.

"The doctor is a long time over his game,"

she said to the old nurse, who still attended to the wants of the school-room. "I think he might have come before now."

"Don't let me keep you up here, Aunt Letitia," said Mar. "There is not much the matter with me; it is a pity to trouble the doctor."

"You will please not meddle with what I do, Mar," she replied. "If you would only pay a little attention to what may be expected from yourself——"

The doctor came at last, and asked a great many questions and looked very grave. He ordered Mar to bed, not to lie on the sofa any longer, and gave a great many directions about quiet and fresh air and beef-tea. He himself helped the boy to his room, and was so careful and so kind that there came to Mar's mind a half elation, half melancholy, in the thought that he was going to be ill—that at last, after his years of delicate health, there was going to be something the matter with him which would prove all that Mrs. Parke had said, and of which he would possibly die. A great excitement, silent and suppressed, rose in his mind with this thought. It was alarming and strange, but it

was not altogether unpleasing. There is a kind of pre-eminence, of superiority, in being very ill to a boy. It was like going into a battle. He felt solemnised, yet half amused. He was to be the hero of a sort of drama—he was to be in danger of his life. It pleased his imagination, which had so little food. And he tried to catch what the doctor was saying when he followed Mrs. Parke into the next room. But by that time he was getting drowsy, and his faculties dulled, and this he could not do.

In the next room the conference was grave enough.

"He has never been ill before," said the doctor. "I have told you so from the first, Mrs. Parke: delicate but not ill, and nothing that he might not shake off with time. But he is ill now. If I am not mistaken he is in for an attack of typhoid, and I fear a bad one. I'll go straight to the hospital at Claremont and send you a nurse—indeed, you had better have two nurses—care is everything. With great care and unremitting attention we may pull him through."

Letitia was pale, but she was ready for the emergency.

"It will not be dangerous for the others?" she said.

"No, no, there's no danger for the others—unless your drains are bad. But he says he was at that horrid little village on the other side of the Park on Friday last, and got a drink of water there. That's enough to account for it. I've often spoken about the state of those cottages. It would be a kind of strange justice if he were to be the first victim. I suppose you'll let his mother know?"

"What is the use of letting his mother know? She takes no notice of him. I think I am the only mother he has ever known."

"There was an aunt," said the doctor, "who was very much devoted to him. They ought to be told. The fever is high, and he has a delicate constitution. He may have to fight for his life."

"Will you come again to-night?" she said.

"I will send the nurses in at once if I can get two, otherwise, perhaps, your old woman will take the night? I'll come back first thing in the morning. But I think you should let the relations know."

When the doctor was gone, Letitia followed him out of the room and went to the school-room, which was quite cool and empty. She sat down upon the sofa which had supported Mar's languid limbs so long, and looked round her as if upon a new world. Her whole being was filled with excitement which threatened to burst all bounds. She felt as if she must have burst forth in laughing or in crying, and if she did not do so it was because the influence of conventional rules and common decorum are too strong to be broken. Every pulse was going like the wheels of a steam engine, and her heart thumping like the great piston that keeps all in motion. Was it anxiety and alarm for Mar that roused that tremendous tumult in her brain? It is to be supposed that she thought so, or tried to make herself think so for the moment. But she knew very well that this was only a gloss forced by a horrified consciousness upon her, and that in the bottom of her heart it was a sudden and dreadful hope which had sprung up in her mind. The child had been so delicate all his life, one whom all the gossips declared she would never rear; and this had left a vague anticipation as of

something she could not prevent, which would be good for them all if it came, modified by a fear of what might be said should it happen in her house, which kept Letitia always uneasy, and dictated those precautions which were half regard for other people's opinion, and half terror of herself. But Mar, though he had been so delicate, had kept, perhaps for that very reason, curiously free of the usual ailments of childhood. When he had them he had them in the lightest form. Never before had this delicate boy, this interloper who stood between Letitia and so many advantages, this child who, everybody prophesied, could not live—never before had he visibly hung between life and death. Typhoid fever! It was a name to chill the blood in the veins of loving parents, of anxious friends. It made Letitia's blood boil with a fever of impatience, of desire, of horrible eagerness, at which she was terrified, but which she could not subdue. It was not her fault. She had done nothing to bring it about. He had got the poison out of her house because of his own childish imprudence, exposing himself as she never would have allowed him to expose himself.

Letitia's conscience was quite clear, and nobody could blame her. And he would die —a creature so fragile, with so little life in him, no constitution to fall back upon; there was no fear of a long and terrible illness; a fever that sucked the strength away, and killed the strongest men, would not last long in such a case as this. He would die. She gasped with sensations unspeakable, and felt as if she could not get her breath. He would die. The obstacle would be taken away from her path, from John's, from Duke's, and nobody could say that she had done it, or was in any way to blame. What a thought to invade and fill her whole consciousness, all the being of a woman who was a mother, and knew what it was in a way to love those who belonged to her! She could not keep down the wild buoyancy of her hope and exhilaration. This boy, who never ought to have existed, who had been from his birth the obstacle to all her hopes, this supplanter, this undesired, unnecessary child — he would die! and for Letitia and all who belonged to her the future of her brightest hopes would be secured at last.

But with this there sprang up in her mind a dreadful impatience. It did not seem to her that she could go on day after day enduring all the vicissitudes of this illness until the crisis came—if indeed his strength held out till the crisis came. Sometimes the patient, if he were weak, collapsed early, and the disease did not run its full course; sometimes it was rapid, violent, *foudroyant.* A hundred confused calculations ran through her mind. Mar had not life enough for that. Probably the fever would be slow with his low vitality, not blazing but sapping the life away; and she would have to keep up all through—expressing anxiety, watching day and night for the change, looking on with outward calm while the doctors would go through all that daily pantomime with the thermometer, which she would scarcely be able to endure. Yes, this is how it would be—weeks of it, perhaps; horrible, lingering on when it might just as well be over at once without all this slow torture. Letitia remembered, after what seemed a long time, that she had an afternoon party on the lawn, and that all her guests would be wondering at her absence. She

would have to put on a grave face, and speak of her anxiety and his delicacy, and go through all the fantastic performances which decorum demanded. But he would die—of that certainty at least there could be no doubt now.

CHAPTER IV

THE family were all very much startled by the news, which Letitia communicated only when the arrival of a nurse in the costume which is not to be mistaken startled the household.

"What does that woman want?" said John, who was prejudiced like so many gentlemen against costume, and did not like the professional air.

"She is the nurse whom Dr. Barker has sent for Mar."

"For Mar?" cried all the party, with varying tones of expression. Letitia looked round upon her husband and her children, and she felt that there was not one of them who had any sympathy with her—who thought at all of the consequences or of what would happen if—— She was provoked beyond expression by the look of alarm and imbecile anxiety on all their faces.

"What is the matter?" John said. "Is there anything more than usual? I thought he had a cold. What is wrong with the boy?"

"Only an attack of typhoid," Mrs. Parke said with angry gravity. They never did sympathise with her or enter into any of her thoughts, though the advantage she anticipated was to them chiefly, she said to herself angrily, and not to her.

And that dreadful word was soon abroad in all the house. It was the evening, after dinner, and all who were at home were in the drawing-room. The two schoolboys, Reggie and Jack, had, of course, gone back to school; and the girls had been talking of their lawn-tennis, and So-and-So's low service, and somebody's volleying, and a great deal of other jargon. They had been obliged to dress in a great hurry for dinner, and no one had had the time to run in and ask for Mar. "Typhoid!" they cried, some of them in loud, and some of them in low tones.

"Who says so? You are always fancying something dreadful. Does Barker say so? And how did he get it?" said John. "I am

sure we have had trouble enough with the drains."

"If one is to have it, one will have it, whatever is done about the drains," said Mrs. Parke.

"But oh, mamma," said Letty, "why a nurse? I know a great deal about nursing. There were those two ambulance classes. It would be so much nicer for dear Mar to have his own people about him. Sarah would sit up at night, she is very fond of him, and I would take care of him in the day."

Letitia did not take the trouble to reply, but looked at the girl only, crushing her as effectually as by a torrent of words. "He shall have every care," she said, "and the best that can be got; but he has no constitution, and I fear it will go badly with him. There is no use in deceiving ourselves."

"Don't be a croaker," cried John, getting up from his chair. It would have been strange, perhaps, if there had not flashed across the mind of John all that was implied in this evil augury. He was not quick nor was he more selfish than other men, but into the hearts of the most innocent there is projected by

times a picture as from a magic lantern, showing as it seems from without, not from within, in a sudden glare of diabolical light the advantage which a great misfortune to some one else may bring them. John was as much horrified by this sudden perception as if he had been compassing the end of Mar. He cried out: "Good God!" which was in reality an appeal against the devilish light that had flashed upon him without any will of his; and then his voice melted, and he murmured: "Poor little Mar! Poor little Mar!"

"Don't give in in that way, father," cried Duke. "Typhoid fever is bad enough, but not so bad as mother makes out. Why, I know half-a-dozen men who have had it. At Harrow there was one fellow as bad as bad could be, and not strong, just like Mar, and he got round all right. The stronger the fellow the worse it is for him. That's what all the doctors say."

These words brought a cold chill to Letitia. In her thoughts, by way of forestalling all the disappointments that might happen, she had already thought of this.

"Oh, mamma, send for some new books

from Mudie's directly," said Tiny; "when Mar is ill we can never get enough books to satisfy him."

"Oh, hold your tongue, Tiny. He will be too ill to read books," said Letty with tears, "and one must not let him talk either, but just a very little—nor even talk to him to amuse him till the fever goes off."

"How dull it will be for Mar!" cried Tiny. "I am sure I shall talk to him and tell him everything. To be dull is as bad as having a fever. Because you have gone to the ambu-ances you think you know—but I don't believe in keeping people so quiet. When I had the measles——"

"Be quiet both of you," said Mrs. Parke, "and understand that neither of you is to go near Mar. He must be left in the hands of the nurses; it is too serious to play with. I shall go myself every day to see that all is right."

There was a chorus of outcries at this decision, but Mrs. Parke was not moved. "No one must disturb him," she repeated. "The people who have the best chance are the people in the hospitals—and Mar must be treated just

as if he were in a hospital. I will not have him disturbed."

"Is it so grave as that, Letitia?" asked John very seriously, scarcely looking at her. He began to divine partly from that gleam which had come upon himself what must be in her mind.

"Nothing could be more grave," she said vehemently; "any one except a schoolboy or a silly girl must see that. What Duke says is nonsense. It stands to reason that a weakly boy with no constitution to fall back upon, attacked by a slow disease that eats away the strength——"

John Parke rose as if the thought were intolerable, and went out of the room hurriedly. He was trying to escape from that devilish suggestion. The boy would die; all the hindrances would be removed; the inheritance would be his which he had always looked forward to, which had been supposed to be his all his life. Not in John's honest brain was that thought bred. It filled him with horror of himself. It made him feel as if he were Mar's murderer, anticipating the boy's doom. "God forgive me! God forgive me!"

cried John, and he went out covered with a cold dew of trouble to humble himself and struggle with the demon. These horrible suggestions come sometimes to the minds that most loathe them; which proves to many people that there is a devil, a dreadful Satan, trying what harm he can do, even though we may grow contemptuous of the horns and hoofs.

The doctor, however, was not so gloomy as Letitia. "It is quite true that he must not be disturbed; but keeping up his spirits is half the battle, and he must not be abandoned either. Mrs. Parke is too anxious. I have always told her she made more than was necessary of young Frogmore's complaints. He's delicate, of course. Still there's no reason for giving up hope."

"My boy, Duke," said John, "says that it's worse for strong fellows than for weak. I don't know if he's right."

"Well, it's never a good thing to be weak," said Dr. Barker, "but there's a kind of truth in it. For the fever sometimes runs higher with a man in the prime of life. Keep up your spirits. If no complications arise we'll pull him through."

Those cheerful tones found no response in the countenance of Letitia, which was tragical in the paleness of passionate feeling. Every word that was uttered by the medical optimist was like a knell in Letitia's heart. If it should be so indeed—but it could not—it should not be so.

"Mrs. Parke has always taken too serious a view," said the cheerful doctor. "I have told her so for years."

"I don't say that I don't always take a serious view," said Letitia. "It is my temperament, I suppose; but you will bear me witness, doctor, that I never have been so anxious about my own children as I have been about Mar."

"Yes, that is true," said the doctor, with a quick glance at her, in which there was something uncertain, doubtful. Perhaps it was the look of suppressed excitement in her which struck Dr. Barker as something strange. She was not an over-anxious mother. Was it love or another sentiment that made her so tragic about Mar? A slight shiver ran over the honest and sensible country practitioner, but he was far too little accustomed to evil passions

to follow it further. He could not take into his mind such a dreadful thought; it was like a ghostly figure sweeping by in the dark, such as he sometimes met on lonely roads on winter nights—not able to tell whether it was a belated fugitive or a distorted shadow. Another subject of more practical importance, as he thought, displaced this vague apprehension. "By-the-bye," he said, "I must not forget one thing. I have been talking to you of the state of those cottages on the other side of the park for years. I've got the water to analyse which these poor people are drinking, and I believe it's the cause of poor young Frogmore's illness. Let this be a reason at once for seeing after their condition; at least it will be getting some good out of the evil which now you cannot prevent. You know I've been talking about it for years."

"The cottages?" said John. He added, "You know I'm in a peculiar position, I can do nothing without Blotting. It's not as if it was my own property."

"Oh, what is the use of talking of such things just now?" said Letitia sharply. There was a sort of half electrical glance between

the two which the doctor felt to blaze across him, scorching his face. He gave a horrified look from one to the other, surprising that infernal light in Letitia's eyes. But John's were covered with downcast eyelids, and the look of his somewhat heavy face did not coincide with that unearthly, devilish flash. Dr. Barker, however, was struck as a man might be struck by lightning. He seemed to lose his moral equilibrium for the moment. A chill horror ran in his veins. When he thought of the boy-patient upstairs with his cheeks growing hollow and his eyes large under the influence of the fever, and these two, watching its progress, perhaps communicating to each other how things were going, hoping for the worse and not the better conclusion, it was as if the earth had been cut away from under his feet, and he saw himself suddenly on the edge of a horrible precipice. He rode away upon his rounds with a doubt whether it was safe to leave the house, whether he ought not to set up some special guard that no evil should approach the boy. Poor boy, with no one who loved him to look after him, but only dangerous hate and the vigilance of

an enemy! The honest country doctor had never in his life been struck as he was that day with a sense of secret horror, danger, and possible crime concealed under the smooth surface of ordinary existence. Twice he turned back before he had got out of the avenue with the idea of warning his nurses, recommending to them special vigilance, and not to allow Mrs. Parke to have anything to do with the patient. But how dared he do such a thing, to rouse any suspicion of the mistress of the house? He had no evidence but a glance, and who could rely upon a look? He might, very probably had, must have, mistaken it; and twice he turned his horse, and at last rode away, but with a mind troubled by many anxious thoughts. He consoled himself by thinking that with two nurses on whom he could depend, no harm could happen to the patient. But after all it was not so much the harm that could happen, as the dreadful idea that his nearest relations were watching by his sick-bed, hoping that he might never rise from it, that upset the doctor. He said to himself that between that and doing anything to expedite the end there was a great difference,

and perhaps it was impossible when there was so much at stake not to be conscious what a difference it would make. Dr. Barker had been in the district a long time, and remembered Lord Frogmore's marriage, and how everybody said it was very hard upon John Parke. So it was, very hard. To expect so long that he was to be his brother's heir, and then to be suddenly cut out. There had been a great deal of sympathy with him at the time, and perhaps it was impossible now not to think, if the boy was removed—— Perhaps it was natural, inevitable, that the disappointed pair should be open to that thought. But to imagine them watching, waiting, while the innocent boy lay ill, hoping for a bad turn, higher fever, hopeless complications—— Good heavens, could anything more dreadful be?

John Parke was innocent of entertaining such thoughts. But he divined them, and his heart was wrung within him. He scarcely spoke to Letitia while the fever strengthened its hold upon Mar, but went solemnly morning and evening to the door to ask of the nurses how their patient was. Sometimes he stood at the open door looking in, saying as well as

he could a cheerful good-morning to the boy. "Make haste and get well, my lad," he would say; and John, though he was not given to anything of the kind, would sometimes bring a rose and sometimes a piece of flowering myrtle from the great tree at the door of the conservatory to lay on the little table at Mar's bedside. Mar, when he was able to remark them, was much touched by these little attentions, and John would go away again soothed by the sight of the active nurses in their white aprons, and the quiet and order of the sick-room. It was a comfort to think that everything was being done. This is a great consolation to every kind looker-on whose anxiety is less urgent than that of love. John never saw Letitia there; he knew that the nurse who was on duty, if moved by no profound sentiment for one patient more than another, was yet on the whole desirous that every one should get well, and had her professional reputation more or less involved in the success of her nursing. There was thus at least no hostile sentiment, but only well-wishers, careful watchers, concerned for his recovery, who were near the boy.

But neither he nor any one any more than

the doctor had any fear of Letitia as if she had been capable of plotting against the young life. No, no, no, a hundred times no. They divined the passion that was in her, the sense of a possibility which would change everything in life, and perhaps, perhaps a wish against which in her heart no doubt she struggled, and would not allow that the balance should turn the wrong way. John pushed the thought from him with passion, ashamed of himself for his suspicion of his wife. He felt that she would not be sorry for Mar's obliteration—such a faint, young, powerless personality—from existence: which would have such tremendous consequences that her mind was carried away by them. And that was bad enough, but it was all. She would not harm him any more than she would harm Duke; and at the utmost, when all was said, the only evidence against Letitia even to this extent was a strange gleam which had got into her eyes.

CHAPTER V

MAR'S illness continued week after week, never violent, but never ending. He was not very ill, but his life was being slowly drained away. The fire of the fever was low, not a great flame, blazing and devouring, but it went on and on. The third week passed, and the fourth, with renewed and disappointed expectations of a change, but none came.

"It will run out the six weeks," said the doctor. "And then—?" Ah, who could say? The good doctor, who had taken care of Mar all his life, turned away from the question. "It all depends upon his strength," he said. His strength! but he had no strength. He was as weak as a child. The nurse lifted him in her arms like an infant—a skeleton, with long, long limbs. It seemed a farce to speak of his strength, as if there was any hope in that.

Duke had gone away before this time—his leave had come to an end, and he had been allowed to come in and say good-bye to his cousin.

"I thought you would have been up and about before I went," said Duke, blustering a little to keep himself from crying. "You are a lazy beggar, to be lying there with nothing the matter. I don't think there's anything the matter with you. You just like to lie there and keep us all slaving attendance. You know you were always a lazy beggar."

Mar did nothing but smile, as he had always done at Duke's jokes which were not great jokes. He said: "Is your leave over?" with his faint voice. "But you could have a day or two again if I sent for you, Duke?"

"Oh, yes," said Duke, "you must send for me the first time you are allowed to get out, to help you downstairs. I'll come, never fear." But after a little more of this tearful smiling talk, the young man beckoned softly to the nursing sister to come with him to the door. "What do you think he means about sending for me?" he said, with a face almost as pale as Mar's.

The nurse looked at him and shook her head. She too had grown to like the patient boy. She put up her hand to her eyes to dash away the rising tears.

"He must not see that I have been crying," she said.

"Is *that* what he means? Do you think that's what he means? And do you think so too?" cried Duke. "Oh, don't say so, nurse, don't say so; it would break my heart."

"I won't say so," she replied. "I think with such a young thing as that there is always hope."

"And you know a lot," said Duke, "as much as the doctor. God bless you for saying so! But you think that is what he means? And he lies there—and smiles—and thinks—of *that*," said the young man, with his face full of awe.

He set out in all the vigour of his young life in the brightness of the summer day to his light work and boundless amusement, with all the world before him—and Mar was lying there, smiling, thinking of *that*. Duke felt as if his own lightly beating heart stood still in the poignancy of the contrast. Oh, why could not

he give some of his life to help out that flickering existence? He went away feeling that there was a pall over the sunshine, and that nothing would ever be truly bright again. But to be sure that was a mood that could not last.

Mrs. Parke had given orders at first that the girls were not to go near the sick-room, but she had not thought then how long it would go on, an endless dreadful ordeal. And when they stole in, now Letty, now Tiny, their mother either did not find it out or made no remark. Letitia during all this time of suspense was of a very strange aspect—her husband and her children did not know what to make of her. She talked very little to them; did not interfere with their pursuits as she usually did. She seemed to care for nothing. Naturally there were no guests or entertainments of any kind, and her interest in her household affairs, which was usually so minute and unending, seemed to have faded altogether. She wrote no letters, made no calls, her social life seemed to come to an end. She did not even go to church, which was a habit she had always kept up rigorously. Three or four times a day she went to the sick-room for news of the patient, and it was there

alone that she seemed to wake up completely. She put the nurses through a catechism of questions. She attended upon the doctor when he came, and listened to everything he said and that was said to him with a hungry curiosity. Her countenance did not vary or betray it. It was known that she was "over-anxious," that she had always taken a despairing view. When he was pronounced to be a little better, there was a little quiver of her head, like an unspoken contradiction; and when he was a little worse a sort of assenting gleam came into her eyes. The nurses did not like her, and answered her questions as briefly as possible. Her determination that everything must go badly irritated the women, who had a natural confidence in themselves and in what their nursing could do, and they both believed that she was more satisfied when the news was bad than when it was good.

"She's not like his mother," they said between themselves, "and she's fixed in her mind from the first that this is how it's to be—some people would rather see the patient die than be proved wrong in their opinion." They thought no worse of her than this.

As a mattĕr of fact, Letitia was very unhappy during this long suspense. She had never anticipated anything of the kind. What she had expected was an illness which would last perhaps a week, and this long lingering malady confounded and exasperated her. She was angry with poor Mar for being so long about deciding what to do, and with the doctor who would not say anything definite, and the nurses whose opinions wavered from hour to hour.

"How is a person to tell when you are never in the same mind from one hour to another?" she said, with the resentment of highly excited nerves. She was strung to the very highest pitch, thinking of nothing else, longing for a crisis, that she might know what she had to look for. She was never at rest for a moment whatever she was doing, but kept always listening, always intent. Every step that approached she thought was some one come to call her, to tell her there was a change. She dropped her work upon her knee, or let her pen fall, to listen for every sound that arose. On the critical day of each week when a crisis might be expected she was so restless that she could not keep still.

"My wife is so anxious," John said, trying to persuade himself that her anxiety was the natural anxiety, the desire that the patient should get well. That anxiety is terrible enough, as most know; but the other anxiety, the horrible watch which is for the patient getting worse, the longing for "a change" in the worst sense—a change that means death, how horrible is that, beyond all description! When she talked at all she talked of his symptoms and of what the night nurse said, and what the other said. The nurses took different sides, as was natural. One of them was pessimist, the other took the doctor's view. It was the night nurse that was the gloomy one—and with her Mrs. Parke was in the habit of having a long consultation very early when she was relieved in the morning—a consultation from which she derived a little satisfaction, and which calmed her nervous excitement. But the day nurse with the cheerful look, who always insisted that the patient was a little better, or looked a little brighter, or had a little more strength, or at all events was "no worse," brought back the nervous excitement which was like a fire in her veins.

The fifth week had begun, and the fight of life and death on the boy's wasted frame was becoming every hour more intense. Would his strength hold out?

"He has no strength," said the night nurse. "I feel every hour as if from minute to minute the collapse must come."

"I don't say he isn't very weak," said the more cheerful sister, "but you never can tell with a delicate boy like that how strong the constitution may be. Sometimes it's like iron and steel, and yet no appearance."

The doctor stood and looked at the worn young countenance upon the pillow. Mar had scarcely strength to open his eyes, to respond to the doctor's inquiries and acknowledge the stir of his morning visit. There was a faint smile upon his face, and sometimes a wistful look round upon the group about his bed, moving slowly from one to another. His mind had never been affected. Sometimes he lay as if in a dream, but when recalled was "always himself," the nurse said, "and that is surely a good sign." Dr. Barker did not deny that it was a good sign, but he looked graver than ever. Letitia devoured him with eager eyes

when they stood face to face outside the sick-room.

"What do you think, doctor?" she said.

"I have told you a hundred times what I think," he replied, with the petulance of distress. "I cannot form a new opinion every hour. If his strength holds out he will do well. All depends upon that. I suppose," he added hastily, "his mother has been kept informed."

"His mother—what does she care?" said Letitia in her excitement. "It is a great thing to us, but it is nothing to her."

"Yes, I can see it is a great thing to you," he answered, with a clouded countenance. "But she has been told, I suppose?"

"Oh, what does it matter? What does it matter?" Letitia said within herself in the misery of her suspense. But she wrung her hands till they hurt her, and controlled herself. "I believe news has been sent," she said.

"But that is not enough," said the doctor, glad on his side to have some reason to find fault, to relieve his own brain and heart with an outburst. "She must be told that his

state is very serious. She must be made to know——"

"Then you think his state is very serious?" said Letitia, with a kind of wildness of concealed exultation in her eyes.

"Have I ever said otherwise?" said the doctor. "Can any one look at him and not see that?—very grave but not hopeless, Mrs. Parke. You will never get me to say more."

"It is only because I want to know the truth," she said, abashed.

"I will never tell you anything but the truth. The mother ought to know. However indifferent she may be, there must be some human feeling left. I remember her as a very sweet woman. And then there was the aunt who was devoted to the boy."

"You speak as if there was but one," said Letitia, with a forced smile.

"Oh, I do not overlook your anxiety, Mrs. Parke! No doubt it is very great—but the other ladies must be told. Tell them——" The doctor paused when he saw her hungry look. It flashed into her face that now she should hear the exact truth, how much there was to fear and how much to hope. She

looked at him as he paused, clasping her hands tight.

"Yes?" she said, breathless. The doctor, it was evident, had thought better of what he was going to say.

"Tell them," he said, "that the circumstances are serious; that there is an absence of certain of the worst symptoms—but again that the matter is grave. It all depends on how his strength keeps up. And that in the present position of affairs I think they should be here."

"You think they should be here," Letitia repeated breathlessly. It seemed to her the most satisfactory utterance she had yet heard.

"Yes, it would be an ease to your own mind to have his nearest relatives on the spot. They would share your anxiety at least—and it is not as if there was any want of room. They should have been here at once—to prevent reflections—in case anything should happen."

A lightning gleam seemed to come out of Letitia's eyes—like that electrical flash which the doctor had thought scorched him when Mar's illness began.

"Then you think——" she said, with a heaving of her breast.

"I think no more than what I have said; but to have Lady Frogmore here, and Miss Hill, would in any case be best."

Letitia repeated "Lady Frogmore" unconsciously under her breath. It was not of Mary she was thinking. It was of the next bearer of that title, the woman towards whom the coronet was floating ghost-like in a sort of trail of cloud.

"I can't believe," said the doctor sharply, "that Lady Frogmore will be so indifferent as is said to the condition of her son."

Letitia went to her writing-table when he was gone with a strange buoyancy. She had not written any letters for some time, but there was a sort of exultation in her now as if the end of her suspense was near. John came in when she had seated herself and begun her letter. He had missed the doctor and was anxious to hear what he had said. There was something in his wife's aspect which startled him.

"The boy is better?" he exclaimed. He gave her in the impulse of the moment a credit which she did not deserve.

"Is he?" cried Letitia, turning round upon her chair, with all the colour going out of her face. She added tremblingly, shrinking from her husband's eye: "Do you mean that there is a change?"

"I thought so," he said gravely, "from the relieved look in your face."

They contemplated each other for a moment in silence, John with pain and distress, she shrinking a little from his eye.

"I don't know what you mean," she said; "though I might be relieved to think that the poor child will not suffer much longer. I am to write to his mother, the doctor says."

"To write to his mother! Then he has given up all hope?"

Letitia did not trust herself to speak, but she nodded her head in assent.

"Poor boy, poor boy!" cried John; "and poor Mary," he added after a moment, with a broken voice.

"It will be nothing to her," said Mrs. Parke briefly.

"God knows! it may rouse her to understand what she's losing: the finest, promising boy, the most generous and patient——"

"Oh, John, I cannot put up with you!" cried Letitia, wild with agitation and excitement. "The one creature that stood between your son and his birthright — between you and everything you have looked for all your life."

John Parke walked about the room in an agitation which was not simple as his emotions generally were. His heart was wrung for the patient boy who had grown up under his eye— but perhaps to forget all that this boy's death would bring him was impossible. He stamped his foot on the ground as if to crush those horrible thoughts that would arise.

"If I could buy little Mar's life with the sacrifice of everything!" he said, with an almost hysterical break in his voice——

"It is easy saying so," she said; "but for my part, Duke is more to me than Mar!"

CHAPTER VI

"THEN, I suppose, there is scarcely any hope," said Mr. Blotting, the other executor, who had come over to inquire after the patient.

The country altogether was moved for poor Mar. People who had never seen the boy sent daily to inquire after him, and the farmers, who had cheered his speech, talked of him and shook their heads as they met on their market days. "There was no stuff in him," they said; "all spirit, and nothing to ballast it." "No constitution from his cradle." And they began to speculate on what kind of landlord John Parke would be when he acted for himself with full power. They all gave a regret to the boy; but that was the most important question after all.

John Parke had not, however, waited, as his wife suggested, to take measures to amend the cottages, where Mar had got what was

probably to be his death, and it was while they were walking across the park to inspect the miserable little hamlet, which was close to one of the gates, that Mr. Blotting had supposed that there was scarcely any hope.

"My wife has been told to write for his mother," said John, very seriously. "Barker would not take such a step as that, in the circumstances, if he did not think it was coming very near."

"Poor Lady Frogmore," said Mr. Blotting, "perhaps it's better for her, poor thing, now, that she has known so little about him—though so unnatural for a mother."

"I wonder," said John, "whether this blow may not stir everything up and awaken her when it's too late."

"It's to be hoped not, now," said Mr. Blotting, "poor lady!" And he added after a pause, "It will make a great change in your position, Parke. It may be bad taste talking of it—but we can't help thinking of it. It must be in your mind as it is in mine."

"I try not to think at all," said John; "it's horrible. If I could buy back the boy's life by any sacrifice——"

"I know, I know," said the man of business, "that's how one feels. But you can't, of course. It's far beyond your hands. And if you throw back your thoughts, it was a great disappointment when this poor boy was born. I felt it for one. I felt for you and Mrs. Parke deeply. It couldn't have been expected of a man like your brother, an old man who had never thought of marrying. It was a cruel deception. I can suppose that the poor boy had very engaging qualities, but it seemed a cruel business at the time——"

"It did, it did," said John. "My wife felt it very much. It was she who brought Mary, the present Lady Frogmore, into the family, so to speak—and she did feel it perhaps more than she ought."

"Not more," said Mr. Blotting; "it was very natural, I'm sure. Well, it is an ill wind that blows nobody good, and you will at least get back your rights. What will you do about those houses when they fall in, Parke? Of course you can always command my best advice, but it will make a great difference when I have no authority in the matter, and you are acting altogether for yourself——"

"Don't speak of it, Blotting. I can't enter on such a question. So long as there is life there is hope."

But John Parke would have been more than man if he had not allowed a thought or two to surprise him in this kind. He hated himself, but he could not help it; that all this would be his, absolutely his, which he had been managing for another; that he should be able to act independently, to think of the children's interests without any responsibility or restraint was a wonderful thought. Poor little Mar! If he could redeem his young life by any sacrifice! But he could not do that. Not all the lands attached to the Frogmore peerage, or all belonging to the British crown, could have any effect upon the disposition of the Supreme Disposer of events. John acquiesced in this certainty with a sigh; and then he thought — how could he help thinking? — of what, when he was a free agent, he would do.

The cottages were a very picturesque group of red roofs and antiquated brickwork, situated picturesquely among a clump of trees. It was a thousand pities to pull them down or do anything to them. They were always the first

sketch made by every amateur artist who visited the neighbourhood, and they figured two or three times in the Academy every year under the titles of "A picturesque nook," "The homes of our forefathers," "A hamlet in Blankshire," etc. A rumour had been spread about in the neighbourhood that the cottages of Westgate were to be destroyed, and naturally the cottagers were up in arms. As Mr. Parke and Mr. Blotting were seen approaching, first one head and then another were seen at the doors, and finally a very old woman, bent half-double with rheumatism, and with a head continually moving with the tremble of palsy, came out from one of the houses and confronted the gentlemen.

"You ain't a-going to do away with the cottages; now don't ye say so," she said, following them wherever they went, keeping between them and the houses, as though her feeble guardianship could have done anything. "Oh, dearie, dearie! Gentlemen, don't meddle with the old places; they'll tumble soon enough of themselves. Oh, don't ye touch the cottages, gentlemen!" she said.

"If we do anything to the cottages we'll

build you new ones, and far better than these, with every convenience," said Mr. Blotting, to whom the picturesque told for nothing, and who would rather have had water laid on than all the red roofs in the world.

"We don't want no conveniences," said the old woman. "We 'as what suits us, and we don't want nothin' more. And what's it all for, gentlemen, as you're a-pulling of us down? Because the young lord drinked a lot of water when he didn't ought to, when he was all in a sweat with his walk? I told 'im not to, and I'd make him a cup of tea. But the young ones they never pays no attention. And oh, my good gentlemen, what's all the fuss about the young lord? He was one as was born to die, he was. Does any of our lads die of the water, them as drinks it every day? No, nor lasses either. They's used to it, and they's strong and well, and plenty of air all their lives, and nothin' goes amiss with 'm. But yon young lord he's as weakly as a lamb in February. Just to look at his long thin legs, and his white face, and you'd see there was nought that was solid in him. Don't you go and judge what's good for us

by 'im. Why, that one would ne'er have had no strength, not if he'd been born and bred at Westgate. It wasn't in 'im, and if it hadn't been one thing it would have been another. He was born to die, was that young lord. There was his mother afore him that was druv crazed by that tother lady as made a fuss about the baby coming. Lord, just think what a woman to have a baby, as couldn't give her answer back, but went mad when she was talked to! I was at the Park at the time. I was in the laundry, and there wasn't one of us servants that didn't know."

"What does she mean?" said John.

"Nothing, I should say," cried Mr. Blotting. "Come, old lady, you've given no reason why we shouldn't pull down your old rookeries that are full of damp and dirt and the rot and mildew. Why, it would be far more comfortable for yourselves. You would be ten times better."

"Dirt yourself, mister," cried the old woman in high indignation; "unless it's Sally Brown's, the woman at the corner, as isn't true Westgate, there ain't no dirt more than's natural. And as for the young lord, you was

always told as you'd never rare him. And no more you haven't; and as for it's being our well, as we drinks every day, it's none of our well. And you just let us alone, mister!" She turned instinctively to Mr. Blotting, as to the inferior person of the two, although, old and nearly blind, she did not recognise John.

"What's that story about the lady?" he said.

The old woman glared at him with her bleared eyes. "You just let our cottages alone, young gentleman," she said.

"It's not so easy as you think to mend matters," said Mr. Blotting. "I could have told you that. You'd better build your new cottages first, and turn them into them before you pull down the old huts."

"And let them die of typhoid in the meantime, like my poor boy."

"Well, if they will, they will—and it's not you nor me that will stop them," said Blotting, who in the way of tenants great and small was no optimist. "They don't care for your conveniences or for what means health to others—but if there's any money going they would like their share of that."

John had tossed half-a-crown into the old woman's hand, who caught it with marvellous cleverness considering her bad sight and doubled-up figure, and he had not patience or tranquillity to do more.

"We can send the surveyor," he said, "for I can't be long absent without thinking something must have happened while I've been away. Let's go home."

Letitia wrote her letter, not to Mary but Agnes — though she had a much stronger aversion to Agnes than to her sister. It was short, guarded, telling merely the fact of Mar's illness, that it was very serious, that he was attended by two trained hospital nurses and under the special care of Dr. Barker, and that everything was done that could be done for him. She added no invitation. "The doctor wishes me to write," she said, "as he thinks it very serious—and if anything further happens I will let you know. Of course you will use your discretion as to whether you communicate this to Mary or not. Probably she will not mind much—which will save her a great deal of grief, poor soul, in case things should turn out badly. He seems to have

caught this fever the day you went away in such a hurry. He deserted us all and strolled off by himself into the park, and wore himself out. You will know best whether you said anything to the boy to upset him. He stopped tired at the houses at Westgate, and asked for some water which was given him from their well. Dr. Barker says this is quite enough to account for it. It is a relief to me amidst all our trouble that he did not get it from anything in my house." And she ended by repeating her promise to write again if there was "any change." Letitia felt that she could now say "my house" without hesitation. It was as good as her house now—her great restlessness was calmed down. She went on and wrote a number of letters telling the sad circumstances to her habitual correspondents, whom she informed that her poor young nephew Lord Frogmore was lying dying, with a great deal of emotion. She wrote very affectionately of Mar. It was easy now to say that he was a dear boy, though always very delicate, never able to do the things that the other boys did. "But he has twined himself very much round all our hearts," wrote

Letitia, "and I don't know how to console the children, who adore him." She could say this without anger or any vivid feeling in the certainty that Mar was going to die. For the first time since she had known him she completely approved of Mar. It was a sad thing, no doubt, but it was for the best. He never could have been able to enjoy life—the best that could have been looked for for him would have been an invalid existence, never to be depended upon; and he was such a good boy, so well prepared, looking forward to his release with such resignation and piety. Letitia almost made herself cry, she gave such a touching account of Mar.

When she completed those letters she felt more calm than she had done for many a day. The feeling of suspense was gone. The doctor she felt assured would never have said so much if there had been any hope left. And now she could permit herself to entertain those thoughts which had visited her at intervals for years, and which she had not permitted to dwell in her mind, thoughts captivating and attractive, of all the changes she would make and all the things she would do when she came into her

kingdom. There were certain improvements to be made in this very house which she had always wanted, which she decided upon the very first time she ever came to the Park, while old Frogmore was still master of all. She had said to John on that occasion (though she was not much more than a bride at the time), "I shall change all the east wing, and turn the library into a second drawing-room when we are here." John had bidden her hold her tongue, and asked how she knew they would ever be there? Frogmore, who was so strong, would probably outlive him, John said. But Mrs. John was sure that she knew better. And now how much had happened! It had seemed all to float from them and become impossible, and then again it had returned to possibility, and now it was nearly come to pass. Very nearly! It was only a question of time now. Ten days or so and everything would be settled—at the furthest; if it was possible that he could hold out so long. She indulged herself by thinking it all out how she could make those alterations. Many a time had the vision drifted across her eyes, but she never allowed herself to caress

and indulge that vision. She thought not only of the alterations, but of a thousand things beside. The position would be so different. No critical observers to remark on what she did; it would be her own to do what she pleased. No narrowness of money to prevent this and that, and drive her into half measures and improvements incomplete. What she did she could do with confidence, knowing that when John's time was over (Letitia did not think that her own time might be over), her son would come after him. Everything would become legitimate and natural from the moment that this poor boy was mercifully removed to a better world. It would be better, far better for him; for he never could have had but a wretched invalid life in this world. And for everybody else how much better. The children would all have their rights — the privileges which Mary Hill had taken from them when she married old Frogmore. To have an Honourable to their name would be an advantage even for the girls. And their way of life would be so changed. Letitia went about the house lightly with a changed countenance. Her suspense seemed over. It was

not that the doctor had said anything more than he had said over and over again; but she took it in a different way. Her mind was at rest. She spoke quietly to the people whom she saw of the great sorrow that was hanging over the house. There was no doubt, and no pretence of any hope in her tones. Her confidence was extraordinary, as had been the rage of her suspense a little time before. She allowed herself to talk to John of the things that would have to be done, and he did not stop her. He said nothing himself, but he did not refuse to listen to her. Her certainty as to their changed positions impressed her husband with a sensation of certainty too. She had always been in the right, and there seemed no reason for doubting her now. This conviction was accompanied in John's mind by a real sorrow for the dying boy. Poor Mar! To purchase advantage by the sacrifice of that innocent life was bitter to John, he said to himself; and if by any effort of his he could save the poor child's life—but what could his efforts do when the doctors had given him up? And no doubt Letitia was right, and it became them to realise

their position. He allowed himself to think of the alterations too.

And meantime Mar lay in a strange confusion, his faculties all dulled with his fever, the burning hours going over him, so that he knew not night from day; with kind hands ministering to him, but only the hands of strangers—and the minds of all about him gradually turning to a consideration of the life and the world beyond, in which he should have no part. There he lay, always patient, smiling still when he was roused from his stupor, drifting on to the end.

CHAPTER VII

LADY FROGMORE had hurried home when she left the Park the day after Duke's birthday, full of agitation and confused trouble, not knowing what ailed her, dissatisfied with herself and everything around, yet like a blind creature groping for what she knew not, a clue to guide her through the darkness. She fretted through all that day, impatient of the lingering of the trains and the long time of waiting at one junction and another.

"If I can but get home! I think I will never leave it again—one is safest at home," she said. When she reached that quiet house at last, embowered in its trees and little park, to the great surprise and even displeasure of the servants, who had hoped for a holiday, she repeated the same sentiment, throwing herself down with a sigh of satisfaction on a

sofa in her pleasant drawing-room. "One is safest at home!"

"Dear Mary," said Agnes, whose nerves were fretted and her temper overcast, so that she could not take this unreasonable satisfaction with the calm she usually showed, "you are safe enough anywhere. Who would interfere with you? England is not like a wild country where people are in danger when they move." Agnes had not been able to show her usual tolerance during this day. It had been very harassing and disagreeable to her, and the very fact of making all things easy for Mary, so that there should be nothing to distract her, reacted upon her guardian, and gave Agnes much more annoyance and trouble than an ordinary traveller. And she had hoped to spend so much of this day with Mar, finding her way again into his confidence, drawing back to her tender bosom the child to whom she had been a mother. Poor Agnes! she had looked forward to it so long, and now it had come to so sudden an end—all for nothing, she said to herself, in her weariness and discouragement; for the hope that had sustained her of a revolution in Mary's shadowed in-

telligence seemed to float away in the childish content with which her sister contemplated the external comforts of home. Agnes knew, too, from the glances thrown at her in passing, that she would have a sullen household to manage—for to look for a week of ease and relaxation in the absence of "the family," and then to have their capricious mistresses return upon their hands in a day, was too much for the flesh and blood of a houseful of English servants. It was not wonderful if Miss Hill, deprived of her holiday too, and accustomed to stand between her sister and all annoyances, should lose heart a little at the end of this weary day.

"I shall never leave home again," said Mary in her gentle voice. "I am not fit to leave home. Everything seems right now that we are back. Even my dear old lord looks at me as if he were better pleased."

"It does not seem so to me," said Agnes. "I know that he would have wished you to stay."

Lady Frogmore looked up at her sister with a mild surprise. "Do not scold me," she said. "I would have done it if I could. For you,

dear, if not for anything else. And to please poor Letitia——"

"Oh, Mary, Letitia!"

"You are very hard upon her," said Mary. "She is like me, she has been disappointed. She has not had what she might have expected. Oh, don't ask me how, for it turns me all wrong. I have never understood it, and I never shall understand it. Keep me away from them, Agnes. Keep me away from them. Don't make me think and think. My head turns round, but I never get any clearer. Oh, don't ask me to go there again."

She put her hands together like a child, and turned her mild eyes to her sister's with more than a child's passion of entreaty in them. How hard it is to fathom the mysteries of a mind thus veiled by heavy misadventure and injury, cut off in fact from the record of its own life! Mary had been roused to think, she had been startled out of her calm, but all fruitlessly, only enough to make her brain swim, and fill her being with confusion and mental pain. She clung to the quiet which was in her secluded home. She felt when she entered it again as if she had escaped

from all that could shake and startle her. The strange commotion that had arisen within her when Mar rose in the rustic assembly, when he spoke with a voice which was familiar, yet unfamiliar, full of echoes of dead voices, and which struck to her very heart, she knew not how, had been like a terrible storm to Mary. She could not find her way among the vague thinkings that were all stirred up within her—broken recollections, suggestions, an indistinct new world which was at the same time old. A little more and she might have caught the clue, found the key, touched the spring that would bring light upon the darkness. But she was not capable of the effort, and the stir of the roused thoughts, like the wings of a crowd of frightened birds disturbed by a strange light, had deafened and dazed her. "Don't make me think and think!" it was the most pathetic appeal of weakness.

Agnes could not resist that tremulous call. She went to her sister and kissed her tenderly. "I will not trouble you more. I will never trouble you more," she said with tears. It seemed to be giving up Mar's cause—but Mar was young and had all the world before him.

Even if it never came to him, that recognition from his mother, which the boy who did not know his mother could have at the most but a visionary desire for—it could not harm him much; it would interfere with none of his rights nor with his personal happiness. But poor Mary's calm and subdued life might be shattered if she were pushed too far. The delusions in which she lived, which sufficed for her, might be destroyed—her quiet banished without any greater good being attained. Agnes gave up a cherished hope when she gave her sister that kiss. She would disturb her no more. Better that she should live and die in this seclusion that suited her, and please herself with a number of innocent things, and do her gentle charities, and smile and be happy in her own subdued way, than forced to search again in the dimness of her confused being, and to wreck her peace—probably for nothing. Agnes gave up her hopes as she yielded in the weariness of that summer evening. She knew as little that events were occurring that very day which might make it entirely unimportant whether Mary ever recovered her complete understanding or not, as she did that

a vague light had already been established in Mary's confused mind, which would not be quenched again. She gave up consciously all attempts to lead that sealed mind to clearer understanding, and doing so with a pang of resignation, seemed to bury for herself all the brighter hopes that had still survived within her—hopes which had supported her through many a troubled and monotonous year.

The Dower House was at the other side of the county, as has been said, and farther off from the Park than if it had been twice as far in a more direct way. It stood on the corner of a little property, one of the portions of the estate which had been longest in the hands of the family, six or seven miles from the nearest railway station, with nothing more important than a large village near. The chief society which the two ladies had was in this village, about the outskirts of which were a few "good houses"—respectable, solid dwellings, with "grounds," not sufficiently dignified to be country places, but superior to the ordinary villa or village mansion—where there lived a few retired people, a soldier or two, Indian officials on pensions, and such like, who, with

the addition of the clergy and the doctor, formed the higher classes of Doveton. Lady Frogmore was much thought of in this little society. Her story, which every one knew more or less, but about which there was always a considerable mystery, her gentleness and kindness, and not least her rank, made her always interesting to her neighbours; and notwithstanding her own complete retirement, their little neighbourly tea-parties and garden-parties were not disagreeable to Mary. She would go nowhere in the evening, but to sit for an hour in a neighbour's garden and see the young people amuse themselves and listen to the talk of the elders—which was of a calm description, not exciting, and in which it was very unlikely that there could arise any question likely to touch her too keenly—was pleasant enough.

For some weeks after her return home she would go nowhere, and her absence made a blank to the good people about, who liked to put Lady Frogmore's name in their list of guests and quote the very simple things that Mary had said; but as it happened, about the time when Letitia had made up her mind with

certainty as to what was going to take place, and acting under the doctor's order had sent a letter to warn Mar's relations of the state in which he lay, Lady Frogmore and Miss Hill, much entreated, had consented to be present at a garden-party at General Forsyth's, who had the nearest house to theirs. They were able to walk over, as it was near. The general's children had grown up since Lady Frogmore came to the Dower House, and were supposed to be favourites of the ever kind but often shrinking woman, who smiled tenderly upon them, but avoided and evaded, no one knew why, all near approach.

It was one of the scenes so familiar now in English country life. A pretty scene enough, if too common to be notable. Young women and young men in their flower of youth and spirit, not leisurely as in the old fashion—too busy even for flirtation, contending in the lists of tennis, a little flushed, a little careless with exercise and the struggle for the mastery — talking as well as playing the game ; while the fathers and mothers sat or strolled about, half watching, more than half occupied with their own discussions. Mary was received with open

arms, placed in the best place, surrounded by a crowd of anxious courtiers who asked to be allowed to bring her tea or ice or claret-cup, or anything that in such circumstances a lady could desire. Miss Hill was not so popular, for one thing because she was not Lady Frogmore, but also because Agnes was not so "sweet" as her poor sister, and with her preoccupied mind and many cares responded less graciously to the compliments addressed to her. Miss Hill was allowed to settle herself where she pleased, and thus was easily discovered by one of the neighbouring clergy, who came up to her with an air of special cordiality, and said, as he shook hands, "I am delighted to see you here. It shows how little truth there is in the rumours that one hears about young Lord Frogmore."

"About Frogmore!" cried Agnes. She had not been listening very closely until that name suddenly brought the blood to her face. "What do you know about Frogmore?"

The clergyman, surprised by her surprise, hesitated a little, but finally informed her that he had been lately at Ridding, which was the county town, and there he had heard a very

alarming account — that Lord Frogmore was down with fever of the worst kind, caught during a visit to some old cottages which had been allowed to get into a dreadful state of neglect on his property, and that his life was despaired of. Dr. Barker was in constant attendance upon him, it was said, and every one knew Dr. Barker was too busy a man to make too much of a trifling illness. "I am only telling you what I heard," said the rector, "for of course you must know better, and it was, I confess, a great relief to my mind to see you. If he were really so ill you would not have been here——"

"I am afraid," said Agnes, "that is not so true as it appears. We keep up but very little correspondence. All the same," she cried to herself, rather than to her companion, "Letitia must have written, surely she must have written if Mar had been very ill. He is always delicate," she said.

"So I have heard."

"And you are sure it was more than that —you are sure there was something definite talked of—a fever? Oh," cried Agnes, "for the love of heaven tell me everything you know."

"I have told you everything I know, dear Miss Hill. I am very, very sorry to have made you so anxious. All that must have been an exaggeration at least. You must have heard."

"Letitia could not—she could not—oh, even she could not," cried Agnes, with great agitation; "and yet who can tell? She might say what was the use? Oh, forgive me. What you have said has made me very anxious. Typhoid fever has a horrible sound. It takes the courage out of one's heart."

"What I heard must have been an exaggeration," said the clergyman. "I wish I had not told you. People are so fond of adding a little to a piece of news. Anything to make a sensation. I dare say it is only a common cold or something unimportant. You will not tell Lady Frogmore?"

"Will you see if our carriage is there?" Agnes said.

She felt as if she were tottering as she walked. She could not keep on her feet. Anxiety had seized upon her like a vulture, placing all its claws in her flesh. She sat down on the nearest vacant chair, where she was

exposed to the conversation of another guest, a lady who did not know many people, and who accordingly flung herself upon the person who seemed to have taken that seat out of kind consideration. But Agnes was beyond those *ménagements* of civility which she would have adopted in another case. When she had recovered a little, without observing that she was being talked to, thinking over this dreadful piece of information did not make it less but more grave. Mar had not written to her, which already had made her vaguely anxious. And who in that house would think of it? Who would take the trouble? Agnes had not the habit of those modern ways to which so many of us fly in a moment of anxiety. She did not think of the telegraph. She turned over in her distressed mind many things that she could do, but not that. She would write to Dr. Barker — she would go to him, or to the Park, where at least a servant would tell her the truth. But it was already evening, and how could she go so late? and how could she live through the dreadful night without knowing? and how could she disentangle Mary from those smiling groups, and persuade her to come home and explain

to her what she wanted—what she must do? The sudden alarm without warning, without preparation—the wild, sudden panic and horror, like the shadow of death descending in a moment over her—took from her all power of thought. When at last she was able to reach the spot where Mary sat, it was almost impossible to get her attention. Lady Frogmore was listening patiently to her neighbours, with all their little stories of the parish and village. She said little herself. That was one reason why they liked her so. She listened to everybody except to Agnes, who had at last got to the back of her chair, and who was too much herself—the other half of herself—to call her exquisite politeness forth.

"Mary, the carriage is here, and it is getting late."

Mary gave her sister a little nod and sat still, listening to Mrs. Brotherton's account of the measles, with which all her children had been "down."

"Mary, couldn't you come away now? The Howards have gone away already, and the Thomsons. And the grass is damp, and the dew beginning to fall."

"Presently," she said, with another look and nod. And now some one else had got possession of her ear.

Agnes went on whispering entreaties; but how was Mary to know there was any urgency in them more than on any other afternoon? She cried at last, in desperation:

"I am ill — I am feeling very ill. For God's sake, Mary, come away."

Lady Frogmore only waited to hear the last of what the vicar's wife was saying, and then she rose hastily and drew Agnes' arm into her own.

"My dear," she said, "why did you not tell me you had a headache before?"

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN the ladies got back to the Dower House, Letitia's letter was awaiting them. Agnes had not known what to say on the way. She had maintained the little fiction of the headache, with which Mary sympathised tenderly, and lay back in the corner of the carriage wondering what she should, what she could do. Endure for this night, at least—that expedient which is always the nearest to a woman—and in the morning on some pretence, with some excuse which did not yet occur to her, go in her own person and see for herself. This was all that Agnes could decide upon. And when she reached home Letitia's letter was the first thing that met her eye. She devoured it, standing in the hall, while Mary went in. A letter which carries a sentence of death may look as little important as a letter which conveys an invitation to tea, and Mary made

no inquiries. That she should pass tranquilly through the hall and go into the drawing-room, while Agnes was reading of her only child's illness, struck her sister as a hideous cruelty and want of heart. She had said to herself she would disturb Mary no more, she would not attempt to awaken the feeling which had lain so long dormant, which surely was now beyond hope. But it was as a bitter offence and wrong to Agnes when Lady Frogmore went past her with a cheerful word to the maid who came to take her shawl, and a mind entirely at ease, while Mar's fate was being sealed. For Letitia's letter left very little doubt as to the boy's fate. "I will let you know if anything happens. That is —" Agnes said to herself, with a gasp of anguish, "if he dies." Oh, heaven! and he might be dying now alone with the trained nurses, nobody near him who loved him! Alas, poor Mar! who was there in the world who loved him? except, perhaps, herself, who had been the only mother his infancy had known, and she was useless to him, unable to do anything for him!

It was a long time before Agnes could face the light and her sister's tranquil looks. She

went to her room and fell on her knees, and prayed with that passionate remonstrance and appeal, and almost reproach, with which we fly to God when He seems about to cut off from us the thing we hold most dear—pleading, putting forth every argument, reasoning with the Supreme Disposer of events, arguing and explaining to Him how it could not, must not be — as we all do, when prayer, which is so often a mere formality, becomes the outcry of mortal disquietude. The tears which she shed, the struggle which she went through, exhausted her so, that for the moment her misery was weakened with her strength. Mary, waiting tranquilly for her downstairs, believed that Agnes had laid down a little, her head being so bad, and approved it as the wisest thing to do. "Don't disturb Miss Hill, she has a bad headache," she said. And so Agnes was left alone to have her struggle out.

"Are you better, dear?" said Mary, in her quiet voice, when her sister came in, in the twilight, just before dinner. Agnes had changed her dress as usual, and in the dim light it was impossible to see how pale she was, and the signs of trouble in her face.

"I have news from Letitia," said Agnes, "bad news—they have illness at the Park. I think I will go to-morrow, if you can spare me, Mary, and see for myself."

"At the Park?" Lady Frogmore paused with nervous questions on her lips. Was it Duke? Was it anything infectious? Was it——? She paused, and instinct taught her that her sister's desire to go and see for herself could mean only one thing. The boy—— She never to herself called him anything but the boy, and never thought of him—which she did seldom and unwillingly, never when she could help it—without a strange tremor and sinking at her heart.

"Is it——?" she said, but she could not put even that formula or ask, is it he? "Is it—serious?" she added in a very low voice.

"I think she thinks he is dying—and she wants no one to come—he has two nurses—and she says she will write if anything happens. If anything happens! Oh, my God, my boy! with no one near him that cares for him. I must go to-morrow, Mary."

Lady Frogmore patted her sister's shoulder with her hand. Her own child! and yet it

was for Agnes that she felt—for her great trouble. "Yes," she said, "you must go," with a strange piteous tone which her sister did not understand, and indeed, in the throng of her own emotions, did not perceive.

"She never says a word of sorrow or regret. She is glad, that dreadful woman! Now," cried Agnes, "it will be all hers, she thinks—there will be no one in her way."

"In her way!" Mary said like an echo. They could not see each other's faces. "Ah, that was always what I wished," she said in a subdued tone.

Agnes seized her sister by the shoulders with a grasp which was almost fierce. "You shall not now," she cried, "you shall not now! you shall think of him for once—not Letitia, but good Frogmore's son—dear Frogmore's son. Oh, my boy, my boy!"

She let her sister go, and fell back, covering her face with her hands. And Mary sank trembling into her chair. But she made no remonstrance or reply. She did not say anything, but cried a little quietly under the cover of the evening. She was moved, if with nothing else, at least with the profound

emotion of her companion. That Agnes should calm herself after this outburst and beg Mary's pardon humbly, and do all that in her lay to appear cheerful for the rest of the evening, it is almost unnecessary to say. She was filled with compunction and tenderness towards the unfortunate mother who knew nothing of maternity. Why should she try to excite and arouse Mary now? Arouse her only to bereavement, to know the misery of loss? Oh, no, no! Agnes said to herself. If he must die, let not the light of life go out for Mary too; it was enough that, for herself, that bitter anguish must be.

She started very early in the morning, and arrived at the Park while still it was high day. Letitia was out. Mrs. Parke had given up her feverish watch since that day when the doctor had bidden her write to the boy's mother. She had discovered that her health was suffering from confinement, and that a little air and change of scene was necessary, as there was really no need for her and she could do nothing for Mar. She drove about with an eager eye upon the property, observing and deciding what must be done when all was

over, when everything was in their own hands. She went to Westgate, and planned where the new cottages were to be. "Your father has been tied down in every way," she said to Letty; "he has not been able to carry out his own plans. But now, alas, in all probability that period is over, and he will be able to act for himself——"

"Oh, mamma, what do you mean?" Letty had cried.

"It is very easy to tell what I mean: poor Mar—though it is dreadful to think of it: it will make a wonderful difference to your father, Letty, when the poor boy is mercifully released——"

"Do you mean," cried Letty, her eyes full of tears and horror, "when Mar, dear Mar, dies——? Is that the dreadful, dreadful thing that you mean, mamma?"

"My saying it will not make him die a moment sooner: but we must be prepared. That is what is coming, alas! However grieved we may be, that is no reason for shutting our eyes."

"Mamma! do you think it? Do you really believe it? I know he is very ill—but there

is a long way between that and—dying. Oh," said Letty, with a shudder, "I cannot, cannot bear it! I will not think it, I will not believe it. What is the good of doctors and nurses, and of all the new things that have been found out, if Mar must die?"

Dreadful question which we have all asked! With neglect and ignorance every terrible loss is, alas! possible—but with all that science and all that care can do, with doctors that discover new methods every day, and nursing that never rests, how is it that still they die? Letty had never faced this question before in her life. She sat by the side of her mother, whose mind was tuned to so different a mood, who was calculating in the fullest impulse of new life and activity what she was going to do—and sobbed out her youthful soul at the first sight of that inevitable fate that kings as well as beggars must pass and cannot escape.

Agnes got out of her humble cab from the station in the middle of the avenue, and walked the rest of the way to the house. Now that she was so near she instinctively pushed off the moment of certainty. The windows were all open; he was living at least, there was still

hope. And even that was a relief. In the hall she found the daily bulletin placed there for inquirers. "No change; strength fairly maintained," which gave her another shock of acute consolation, if such words can be used. "But I must see him. You know me. I am Lord Frogmore's aunt," she cried. "No, I cannot wait till Mrs. Parke comes in. I must see him." The footman called the butler, who did not know how to stop this impetuous visitor; but before he had appeared Agnes had flown upstairs, feeling a freedom in the absence of Letitia which increased the sense of relief. The nurse came to the door of Mar's room, with her fingers to her lips, as she heard the hasty footstep. It was the cheerful nurse, the optimist, who thought that young patients recover from everything. She perceived in a moment that this was no formal inquiry, and hastened to say that the patient was "no worse." "You may think that's not much, but it's a great deal," she added, coming out into the outer room.

"Oh, nurse, God bless you! I thank you with all my heart!" cried poor Agnes, bursting out, but noiselessly, into a passion of tears.

Upon which the cheerful woman shook her head. "We must not go too fast," she said. "He is very bad. But I have never been one that took the worst side. I've seen that kind before; a long, weedy slip of a boy that's outgrown, you would say, his strength. But they're stronger than you think for. I say, while there's life there's hope."

Agnes Hill had heard these words often before, as we all have done, and looking up through her grateful tears with a fresh *accès* of misery she said, "Is that all? Oh, is that all?"

"The doctor gives him the six weeks," said the nurse, pursuing her own line of thought, "but I shouldn't be surprised if there was a change to-morrow or next day. That will be five weeks. I can't tell you why I think it, but one can't be so long with a case without forming an opinion. To-morrow night or early on Thursday morning I shouldn't wonder if the change came."

"Oh, nurse, the change!" said Agnes, clasping her hands, with the full sense of the words flashing on her mind.

"Yes," said the nurse. "I can't say, and

no one can say, what change it will be—but I believe the fever will go. And then—it all depends upon his strength," she added, "and I take the cheerful view."

"You think there is still hope?" said Agnes, taking the woman's hand in hers.

"Oh, plenty of hope!" said the optimist. But when the anxious visitor was allowed to come within the door, and from that corner saw Mar lying in the doze in which he spent most of his time, her heart sank within her. Nothing could look more feeble, more like death, as if he were gone already, than the waxen face of the boy, with his dark eyelashes against his cheek. She turned away and put her hands to her eyes, thinking he was already gone. What did it matter what any one said? Hope died with a pang unspeakable in the anxious woman's breast. She came away again without listening to the further words of comfort which the nurse poured into her ears. Comfort—what comfort was there possible when he lay there, gone, wasted to a shadow, shrunken to nothing, with those wide circles round his eyes, and the blue veins like streaks of colour? Agnes said to herself

she had seen too many to deceive herself. She knew, whatever any one might say.

As she came down again to the hall, Letitia's carriage arrived at the door. Though Agnes was so hopeless and so entirely convinced that nothing could now avail, the sound of the carriage wheels on the gravel made her shrink and glow with indignation, as if the noise might harm him. The first words she said to Mrs. Parke were of reproach. "Couldn't you drive round another way, not to disturb him?" she said.

"Ah, you have come to see our poor Mar. No, dear boy, we don't disturb him. Nothing has disturbed him for a long, long time, alas!" said Letitia. The mournful motion of her head, her measured tones of fictitious grief, gave Agnes an impulse to strike her, as a brutal man might have done, upon the lying mouth.

"Oh, Aunt Agnes," cried Letty, "stay, stay! Don't go away." There was no possibility of doubting the sincerity of Letty's wet eyes and tear-stained face.

"I am afraid I cannot ask you to do that," said Letitia. "If it had been Mary—— But

there are too many people already in the house. And you could do Mar no good, Agnes; in all likelihood he will never recognise anybody —he will just sleep away. And the agitation is more than I can bear. And at such a moment it is best there should be nobody in the house but the family alone."

"I am his mother's sister," said Agnes painfully.

"But such a mother! who has never spoken to him, never acknowledged him, would have turned him out of his rights if she could. No, he must be left now to those who have cared for him all his life."

"Oh, Letitia," she cried, in her misery, "and have you nothing to blame yourself with in that? Is your conscience clear? Don't you remember, as we all do—as we all did—for most of them are gone?" she cried, wringing her hands.

Letitia looked at her, opening her eyes wide, then gave her daughter a glance of appeal, and shook her head. "Poor thing!" she said. "Poor Agnes, it has been too much for her. This dreadful mental weakness is in the family. Tell one of the men, Letty, to get

ready to take her to the station. My poor Agnes, rest here a little and Thomas shall take you to the train."

Agnes said not a word more. She turned and hastened away, almost running to get into the shelter of her cab before the storm of wretchedness and fierce indignation, which she could scarcely keep silent so long, should burst forth. And now she was about to triumph in her wickedness, this cruel, terrible woman! The stars in their courses fought for her. Mar's innocent young life, and Mary's reason, and all the misery that had been, were but steps in her advancement. And now she had all but reached the climax of her life.

CHAPTER IX

AGNES got home so late that she did not see Mary that evening. And next day there was not very much conversation between them. Lady Frogmore could see by her sister's looks that she had not very cheerful news to give. She said with a sort of new-born timidity, "I hope things are better than you thought," to which Agnes made no reply but by shaking her head. It rained that day. One of those soft, long-continued summer rains which pour down from morning to night without any hope of change, refreshing and restoring everything that had begun to droop in the too fervid sun, but shutting the doors of the house against the all-pervading moisture, and making all rambles impossible. Few things are more depressing to a heart already deeply weighted than this persistent rain. The gray of the

sky, the patter on the leaves, the monotony of the long hours increases every burden. Even in the happiest circumstances the prisoners indoors long for something to happen, for somebody to come. And it may be believed that to Agnes, in the fever of her anxiety, every hour seemed a year long. This night or to-morrow might be the decisive time. The secrets of life or death were in those slowly passing moments, the balance slowly moving to one side or another. She went through all her so-called duties, the little domestic things she had to do, the little nothings that seemed, oh, so unimportant, so futile, in face of the great thing that was about to be decided. She asked herself how she could endure to do them, to order the little dinner, to superintend the little economies while Mar lay dying. But had she been with Mar what could she have done? Sat and looked on in the most desperate suspense, still able to do nothing for him, to do nothing for anybody, to wait only till the end should come.

There came a moment, however, when the courage of Agnes failed, and she could bear

it no more. She told her sister again that she had a headache—a pretence which Mary seemed to understand, asking no questions—and would go early to bed. But she did not go to bed. It seemed something to sit up, to accompany the vigil of the nurse, the possibility of the change with the intensity of feeling if not of presence. When Agnes closed her eyes she seemed to see the whole scene—the room with its shaded light, the wasted form scarcely visible in the bed; the nurse—a silent figure—watching the long hours through. She did not know that the nurse who was then with the boy was one who did not hope—which was a thing which would have added heaviness to the vigil had she known it. She had not the heart to go to bed. It seemed somehow as if she were doing something for him to sit up and count the hours and spend her soul in broken breaths of prayer. Oh, how broken, how interrupted with a hundred fantastic uncontrollable imaginations! Still it was something to join herself to the vigil, if no more.

She was so absorbed in her own deep anxiety and thoughts that she did not hear

any movement in the house, and thought nothing but that the household was asleep and hushed at its usual early hour. And when she heard a stealthy step come to her door after midnight, Agnes' mind was so confused from reality by that vigil that she sprang up with a breathless terror lest it might be the nurse coming to call her to tell her the change had come, and that Mar's life was fading away. She made a swift step to the door and opened it, unable to speak; but only found Lady Frogmore's maid outside with an anxious face.

"Oh, Miss Hill, I'm so glad you're up," she said; "I wish you would come to my lady —she is not herself at all. I can't tell what is the matter with her."

"Hasn't she gone to bed, Ford?"

"I got her to bed, ma'am, quite comfortable, I thought; but I stopped about doing little things, for I saw she was wakeful; and then all at once she got up and called me and caught me by the arm. 'Ford,' she says, looking in my face very serious, 'who was it that said, May he grow up an idiot and kill you? Who was it, who was it?' 'Oh, my

lady, I don't know,' I said; 'I never heard the words before.' 'It was a dreadful thing to say,' she cries, always looking at me. 'Ford, do you think words like that ever come true?' Perhaps I was too bold, Miss Hill; but I spoke up and said, 'No, my lady, I'm sure they don't; for if they did, God Almighty would be putting us in the power of the worst and dreadfullest—and He would never do that.' 'No, Ford, He would never do that,' she said, with the tears in her dear eyes. Oh, Miss Hill, there's some change coming. I don't know what it is. And now she's trying all her keys upon that box we brought from the Park. We've not been able to find one that would open it; but I got another bunch just now, and while she was busy I thought I'd come and call you. Don't be frightened, Miss Hill. I don't think it's a change for the worse."

"Oh, Ford," said Agnes, "it is just the bitterness of life. It's a change that will come too late. Oh, my boy! it must be his dear spirit that is moving his mother's heart."

"Let's hope it's something better than that. Let's hope it means good news," said the woman, who knew a great deal of the family

in her long service, and nearly, if not all, its mysteries. But Agnes, whose heart was very heavy, only shook her head. When she went into her sister's room, Mary was standing against the light, a white figure wrapped in a white dressing-gown. Her partial confusion of mind, the subdued and quiet life she had led, her exemption from strong emotions, had kept an air of comparative youth about her. Her hair was almost white, but it gave no appearance of age to the face, which had the appearance of one purified and refined from earthliness by long misfortune and trouble. She had lighted a number of candles, which encircled her with light, and was standing looking down into the box which was open on the table with a strange air of tremulous discovery, indecision, terror, and joy, like one who has found out some astonishing thing which she cannot believe yet knows to be true. She turned half round with a warning movement, as if begging not to be disturbed, then suddenly putting out her hand drew Agnes close to her.

"What is that? Do you know what it is?" she said.

The only answer Agnes made was with a burst of tears: "Oh, Mary! Oh, my dear! my dear!" she cried.

A smile was on Mary's face—a strange tender smile, full of all the softness of her veiled and gentle soul. She took out something tenderly and reverently, as if it had been a sacred thing. The curious nurse, peering behind these two absorbed women, expecting to see some mystery, felt herself to come down from imaginative poetic heights to the commonest familiar ground when she saw what it was. Ford almost laughed with the surprise, but dared not, so strong was the sensation of passionate feeling that seemed to fill the air. What Lady Frogmore took from the box was the first little garment that is ever put upon a child. A little film of lawn, not much more; the most delicate and softest of fabrics made to fold over the delicate body, in exquisite softness and whiteness, as if the finest fairy web of earth had been chosen to wrap the little thing new-born, come from among the angels. It was unfinished—a narrow line of very fine lace only half-sewn round the little sleeves. Mary took it up and held it in her

hands, spread out upon them. Oh, what soft suggestions of trembling happiness, of wonderful anticipation, of tender mystery, and dreams were in it!

"What is this?" she said, in a whisper; "tell me what it is."

Agnes had put her arms round her sister, leaning upon her—she who was usually the strong one, the supporter and prop—and laid her head on Mary's shoulder. The sight of the little tender relic, so familiar, so full of suggestion, on this night of fate, overcame her altogether. Oh, to think of the infant for whom that little wrapper of softness had been made; whom his mother, who had made it with such holy and tender thoughts, had never known; who was lying now between life and death, perhaps having crossed the awful boundary, lingering near them, breathing into her long-closed and stupefied heart! Agnes could make no answer. She sobbed convulsively upon her sister's shoulder. "Oh, my baby, my boy, my little Mar, my little Mar!" she cried, with a poignant tone of anguish which pierced the soft air, and the soft silence of the night, like something keen

and terrible, a sharp blade and point of passionate human feeling.

Mary held up the stronger woman with a rally of her own strength, but did not move otherwise. Her eyes were full of tears, but there was no anguish in them. She said in a low voice, like the coo of a dove:

"No one need tell me. I know. It was I who made it for my baby—my baby! And he was born. I remember now everything. The old mother was there—my mother—don't you know—and so proud. And my old lord, my dear old lord—with his heir—— Agnes, Agnes!" she cried suddenly, "what have you done to me, to keep me so long from my boy?"

Agnes sank down upon her knees on the floor. She held up her clasped hands as if she were praying to the white figure that stood over her. "It can do no harm now," she cried. "What does it matter if we all go mad? I think I shall: to see her remember him, to see her find out the truth too late—too late! Oh, God, that I should have my answer now when it is all over! It would have been better if there had been no answer—no answer at all."

"Agnes," said Mary, gently laying a hand upon her head. She held the precious little garment in her other hand, and kissed it, pressing it to her lips and her cheek. "Agnes," she said in her soft voice, pitying her sister's emotion, "I do not blame you, dear. I have been kept in the dark, I don't know why; I have done many strange things not knowing. Perhaps my — my baby — my boy has been injured; God forbid. But I don't blame you, dear. If he has been injured we can put it right. All can be put right now we know. You meant it, I am sure, for the best. Agnes, I never, never will blame you, dear. Oh, rise up now and tell me, tell me all you have kept from me; tell me everything about my boy."

"I think God has taken him," cried Agnes on her knees. "This was the night—I think he must be here to have found his way to his mother's heart. Oh, Mar, Mar! if you are dead, if you hear, say something, let us see you one moment, one moment before you go to heaven. One moment, one moment, Mar!"

The maid who was standing by, and whom these words froze with terror, thought to her

dying day that she had heard something, she knew not what, like the passing of a soft foot-step, like a subdued breath, and would have turned and fled, had she not thought herself safer in the room with the lights than in the dark passages outside. This impulse of terror was stopped in Ford's mind by the look her mistress gave her — which was a look which Ford had exchanged with many persons over Lady Frogmore's own head — a look of pity and appeal, consulting her what was to be done for the distracted woman at their feet. This curious turning of the tables stupefied Ford. It was as if an infant from its cradle had turned and bid its nurse care for its mother.

"All this has been too much for her," said Lady Frogmore. "Help me to put her in my bed; Ford. She and I have always been together. We slept together when we were two little girls in the old vicarage. Agnes, let me lift you, dear; don't strain yourself or take any trouble. We'll stay together this wonderful night. And when you're able you will tell me; let me lift you first——"

"You!" cried Agnes, stumbling somehow to her feet. She added in a humble tone,

coming to herself, "I have forgotten my duty, Mary. Don't think any more of me. It was more than I could bear, just for a moment."

"Yes, I saw it was too much. Ford, do you think you could sleep on the sofa, just to be at hand if we wanted anything? I am not easy about her still. We'll stay together to-night. Lie down and I will sit by you, and when you are able you will tell me——"

"My lady, it would be much better for you to get your natural rest."

"Mary, you must not sit up with me!"

"And why not, I should like to know?" said Mary. "Don't you know I'm very happy to-night? Don't you know I've found out what has been on my mind so long? I knew there was something. I have never said anything to you, but it has been, oh, so heavy on my mind! Something, something that has gone away from me that I could not get back, and when I dreamt of my old lord he was always frowning, always angry. Agnes! I was making this, and mother sitting as there, and you pouring out tea, when— We were all very happy — I remember my thread breaking just

there, when I had nearly finished. And I turned to take another, and— Then there was something that happened before — before he was born."

"He was born that night," cried Agnes, "God bless him!" She was very pale, and her eyes had become dry and shone as if with fever. In her mind there was a deep wonder whether Mar heard her, whether it would please him, though he was dead, to have the story of his infancy told to his mother. And with this half distracted thought came one that was quite real, quite rational; the anxious determination to shut out all reference to Letitia's visit from the still wavering mind of her sister; to keep that, which was the key of all that followed, from her recollection if possible.

"He was born that night—God bless him!" said Mary slowly. Then she added, "I remember a cluster of people bending over him, and the light on father's bald head, and my dear old lord with his face down quite close, and the doctor standing saying something about the child. And then—and then—what happened? I remember no more."

"You were very ill, oh, very ill; so ill

that—— Oh," said Agnes, "don't make me think of that terrible time."

"Ah!" said Mary, a quiet seriousness coming over her face, though her lips still smiled, "you thought I was going to die?"

Agnes made no reply.

"But even that," said Lady Frogmore, "was not enough to make you all deceive me so cruelly. No, no, my dear, I did not mean cruelly. You must have thought it for the best. One can but do what one thinks is for the best. Was there ever such a thing before that a woman should live and never know? Do you remember what the Bible says, 'Can a woman forget her child, that she should not remember——' Oh," cried the poor soul, "what you have taken from me! How much you have robbed me of!" She paused a moment with her hands clasped, with the consciousness of wrong on her face. Then that sterner mood died away in the old sweet way of making the best of it, which Agnes remembered with a melting of her heart had always been Mary's way. "Never mind," she said. "Never mind. I know now, and you meant it all for the best."

CHAPTER X

MARY sat by the bed in which Agnes lay for nearly half the night. She was so determined on this strange arrangement that her sister had to yield, and as long as the darkness lasted, which in July moves slowly, much more than in June, the conversation went on. Ford lay on the sofa in a distant corner, and slept soundly, but neither of the ladies had any inclination to sleep. It distracted the thoughts of Agnes from the possible awful importance of this night in Mar's life to tell Mar's mother everything that had happened, dwelling as briefly as possible upon the illness which had separated Mary from her child, and endeavouring to blur over as best she could the blank which that illness had left behind in Mary's mind. It was indeed a very broken story, in which a stranger wanting information would

have seen the most serious gaps and deficiencies. But to Mary the interest of the details in which Agnes took refuge to avoid the more serious questions, was so great that it was always possible to carry her past a dangerous point: and the murmurs of the two voices going on all through the night, low, breathed into each other's ears, were more like the whisperings of two girls over their little secrets of love than the clearing up of what was almost a tragedy, the revelation of the strangest, troublous story. Mary herself was lost in a still vague and tremulous joy, all innocent and soft as the little garment that had been the happy cause of it, possessing as yet no complications, realising nothing but that she had been proved to have the dearest of all possessions to a woman—a child, a baby, who to her thoughts was a baby still, and at present linked himself but dimly to any idea of further developments. To be told that he was Mar, still gave little enlightenment to her mind, which did not know Mar. Something that could be wrapped still in that little film of innermost apparel — although it was at the same time something which could consciously

respond to her affection, reflect his father's image as Agnes said he did—something that was at once a loving human creature and an infant entirely her own. This was Mary's conception of the child whom she had discovered, as if it had been a jewel that was lost. She was not shaken by her discovery as had been feared. She took it sweetly, quietly, as was natural to her gentle soul. Happily it had come without any harsh discovery, in the gentlest way, and as yet there seemed nothing but happiness in the lifting of the veil, the opening up of the old life. Mary cried as she sat and listened, shedding many soft tears. Her eyes shone behind them with joy and peace. She had found what she had lost. No more would her old lord frown upon her in her dream; no more would she feel that imperfection, that something which she could not understand, the mystery which had haunted her life, though she did not know what it was. She could not, perhaps would not, for even in this feeble state there is some moral control, allow herself to think further. It was enough that she had come out of the darkness, and that the light was sweet. When the daylight

began to come in at the window and make the candles pale, Lady Frogmore rose, as light and serviceable as if it had not been she who had been surrounded with such anxious cares for so many years, and placed upon such a platform of weakness and disadvantage. She was not weak nor at any disadvantage now. Her maid slept. Her sister, who had ministered to her all these years, lay silent, looking on while she put out the candles and drew the curtain over the window. "I am coming to bed," she said, "if you will make room for me, Agnes: not because I am tired, for I could sit and hear of him for ever, but because we must be early astir to-morrow, and I suppose rest is necessary. I don't feel any need of it," she said, with a soft laugh. "None at all. I feel young and strong as if I could do anything. I feel about twenty, Agnes. But make a little room and I think I shall sleep. It is like old times," she said as she took her place by her sister's side, "like old, old times, when the little girls were always together. Do you remember the time when we two were the little girls?"

They kissed each other, laughing and crying over that old recollection. How long,

how long ago? And all life had passed since then, and here they were, two sisters growing old, with wrinkles upon the faces which the early light revealed, despising all the tender fictions of the night. Mary soon slept as she had said, fearing nothing, innocent in the discovery she had made. She fell asleep like a child with the light of the summer morning growing on her face. But Agnes could not sleep. When her sister's regular breathing showed the deep repose in which she was wrapped, Agnes stole out of bed and went to the furthest window where there was a glimmer of the rising sun, and knelt down there in the dawning ray, turning her face towards the east. Why she could not have told. To turn her face towards the east was no spell, there was nothing in that to secure that her prayers should be heard. And it could not be said that she prayed. Her soul and body were both worn out. She knelt there silent, her head bowed in her hands. The new day was bringing life or death to Mar—which was it bringing, life or death? She knelt on silent, like an image of devotion. It was something at least to await that crisis, when it should come, upon her knees.

Lady Frogmore slept till it was late, long after Agnes had dressed and come upstairs again to await at her bedside her sister's awakening with a little anxiety after all the excitement of the night. Mary had lain very still; she had not moved for hours, and was sleeping like a child. But when she began to give signs of waking, her appearance changed. She moved about uneasily, her face contracted as if with pain; she put out her hands as if appealing to some one. Suddenly she sprang up broad awake in her bed. "Ford!" she cried, and then "Agnes!" as she perceived her sister. Her breath came quick, a look of terror came over her face. "Who was it?" she cried, "Who was it—that said, 'May he grow up an idiot, and kill you——' Who was it, Agnes?"

"Oh, my lady, my lady!" cried Ford from the other side of the bed.

"Mary! don't think of that, for God's sake."

"Who was it?" she cried. "It was to me it was said."

"Oh, my lady," said Ford, "don't think of such dreadful things."

"'May he grow up an idiot—and kill

you—' It was said to me—it was a curse upon my baby — my child! Who said it, Agnes?—you know."

"Oh, Mary, what does it matter now? What harm could such wicked words do to any one? Yes—yes, it is true. Mary, I ought not to tell you, it was Letitia. Oh, what does it matter now?"

Mary pushed her away, flinging herself out of her bed. "Not matter! Ford, let me dress at once. Order the carriage: what is the first train? We must go at once by the first train."

"Where, Mary? Oh, my dear, where?"

"She asks me where?" cried Lady Frogmore, appealing in her excitement to the maid. "She asks me where, and she knows my boy is in that woman's hands—my child in that woman's hands. She said, may he grow up an idiot—my child, my baby! and he is in her hands. Oh, quick, quick, give me my things! Order the carriage! There is a train, early, that we went by before. Oh, the slow, horrible train it is, I remember, stopping everywhere; but at least don't let us lose it now."

"Is it to the Park you are going, Mary?"

"Where else?" cried Lady Frogmore; "is

not my child there? and in her hands." She was too impatient to accept the usual services of her maid, but dressed herself in wild haste, her trembling hands tying strings and fastening buttons all wrong. Her two attendants could do little but look on as in her agitation she snatched at everything. The gentle Mary, always so tranquil and mild, was transfigured with passion and eagerness. When she heard that it was too late for the morning train, it was a shriek rather than a cry which burst from her breast. "Oh, why did you let me sleep? Why did I sleep?" she cried bitterly. There was no possibility of calming her, no means of explaining how they had arranged everything for her comfort that she might rest after her unusual excitement and exhaustion. She, rest! Mary, who had been the object of unceasing care for years, whose every mood had been considered, and from whom everybody near warded and kept off any possible shade of annoyance, forgot all that in a moment. She became the Mary of old, she who was Letitia's right hand, she who spared no trouble, who thought of everybody but herself. Mary was as much surprised at being the first to

be thought of, at having her rest cared for, as if that long time of care and observance had never been. "Rest, for me?" she cried. "You should have known better, Agnes—you might have known I should not rest till I have seen my boy." She woke without a cloud upon her memory of that fact, but with this new dread springing up in her mind which could not be calmed down. They set off in time for a later train after a weary interval of waiting, an interval that seemed to both as if it would never end. Mary had been seized in the new sense of motherhood with a panic and fear of alarm which nothing could quench. She who had forgiven everything to Letitia, who had thought of nothing either in her madness or her recovery but the interests of her former friend, now feared her as if she were a criminal, and felt that every moment the heir remained in her hands was a moment of danger. "She will do him no harm," Agnes tried to say. "She is not kind. She does not love him, but she will do him no harm." Mary would not listen to this voice of reason. The woman who had wished that the unborn child might grow up an idiot and kill his parents,

appeared in no light but that of a possible murderess to her who had newly discovered his existence and that she was his mother. She waved off her sister's soothing words. She put Agnes herself—Agnes who had loved him always, who had been his first guardian, all the mother he had ever known — in a secondary place as one who could not divine the passion of the mother love. "It is easy for you to speak," she said, crying out in her impatience that the horses crept, that they would be too late for the train, and then that the train itself was like a country cart, and would not go. Then there came those long waitings at the junctions, the interval between one little country conveyance and another. The rain of yesterday had all passed away. The day was bright, illuminating the face of the country, mocking at the heaviness of the travellers. Lady Frogmore was flushed and eager, full of inquiry, walking about during the times of waiting, explaining to everybody that she was going to her son, to bring him home, to the great confusion of those who knew her story, and knew too that Mar lay dying. Her acquaintances looked at her with

trouble and suspicion, looked anxiously aside at Ford, who followed her mistress about as she walked up and down. Had poor Lady Frogmore's brain given way again, was what they asked each other with their eyes? But it was none of their business, and there was no one important enough to interfere.

As for Agnes, she was incapable of any activity. When she was permitted to be quiet for a moment there fell upon her heart the other dreadful burden which Mary had not understood, which Agnes shrank from insisting upon. Was it all too late, too late, a terrible irony of Providence which sometimes seems to keep the word of promise to the ear, as well as the pagan fates, to give when the gift is no longer of any use? Was his mother hurrying in all the new passion of her love and trust to find no child, no son, but only what was mortal, the poor cast-off garment of flesh that had once been her boy? Was it all over, that struggle? or had it perhaps ended, as the nurse hoped, in life and not in death? As she approached the time when she should know, Agnes' mind began to play with this hope; tremulous gleams of happiness and possibility flashing before her

eyes, which she dared not receive or dwell upon, but which came to her without any will of hers, flaming through the dark, lighting up the skies, then sinking into greater gloom than ever. While Mary walked about in the intervals of waiting, Agnes sat out of sight in the most retired corner she could find, dumb and faint with the awful suspense. She could not communicate to her sister what she feared, yet feared doubly for the consequence to Mary if in the heat of her newly awakened feeling she should come suddenly against that thick blank of loss. Oh, to forestall the next turn, to know what a few hours might bring forth—happiness, the perfection of being, a new life, a brighter world — or madness, misery, and death? Thus the one sister sat dumb and incapable of speech, her throat dry and her lips parched, while the other, all energy and eagerness, soothed her impatience by movement and eager communication of her purpose —going to find her boy.

The railways have almost annihilated distance, everybody says, and it is true. But when a succession of slow country trains on cross lines have to be gone through, with many pauses,

stoppages, and changes, there is nothing which gives the same impression of delay and miserable tardihood. To haste for a little time towards your end, and then to stop and spend as long a time or longer in aimless waiting, repeating the same again and again in an afternoon's journey! No waggon on the country road seems to be so slow, so lingering, so impossible to quicken. It was dark when they arrived at the nearest station to the Park, and then a long interval followed before they could obtain the broken-down rattling, clattering country fly which drove them six miles further to the Park. It was all that Agnes' lips could do to utter an inquiry, "How is Lord Frogmore?" when the keeper of the lodge, woke up out of his first sleep, stumbled forth to open the gate, half reluctant to admit visitors at such an hour. "I think I heard as the young lord's a bit better," said the yawning lodge-keeper. Her heart leapt up, almost choking her in her sudden relief. But how did she dare to trust this indifferent outsider, who cared nothing? At least, at least, he lived still, which was much. Mary had grown quite silent in the excitement of the arrival. She put her hand

into her sister's and grasped it as if to keep herself up, but said nothing. They dismounted out of the noisy fly at the end of the avenue, Mary obeying the impulse of Agnes, asking no reason. There were still lights about the upper windows, and a glimmer in the hall, the door of which was opened to them by a servant who was in waiting, and who at first looked as if he would refuse them admittance, but gave way at the sight of the two ladies. He gave Agnes in a subdued whisper the bulletin, "A little better—fever diminished," which in the instantaneous and unspeakable relief, took all strength and power to move from her after all her sufferings. She leaned back upon Ford, nearly fainting, her eyes closing, her limbs refusing to support her. In that moment Lady Frogmore drew her hand from her sister's. She asked no questions. No weakness or sinking of heart or courage was in her. She neither looked nor spoke to any one round her, but swiftly detaching herself, throwing off her cloak, disappeared up the great, partially-lighted staircase as swift and as noiseless as a ghost.

CHAPTER XI

THE day after the hurried visit of Agnes to the Park had been one of gathering darkness and exhaustion to the young sufferer. He was so ill and had been ill so long that the interest of the household had almost come to an end. There was nothing to be done for him, not even the beef-tea to prepare, the variety of drinks which had kept up a certain link of service between the sick-room and the rest of the house. All that seemed over. He had passed from the necessities of life while still living, and now there was nothing but a half-impatient waiting—a longing of strained nerves and attention for the end of the suspense—till all should be over, and the little tale told out.

Letitia, who felt herself the chief person involved, did not feel even impatient that day.

It was by this time a foregone conclusion, a question of time. The doctor even had said scarcely anything, had only shaken his head, and even the cheerful nurse, the woman of daylight and good hope, was daunted, and did not repeat her better auguries. John, who had avoided his wife, who had refused to discuss the subject, now let her speak, sitting with his head bent on his breast, and making little reply, but still listening to what she said. She had a great many plans, indeed had drawn out in her active mind a whole scheme of proceedings for their future guidance, of changes to be made both for pleasure and profit, things of much more importance than those alterations in the house on which she had set her mind the first time she came into it. Letitia spoke low, but she spoke boldly, bidding her husband remember that though it was very sad it was a thing that had always been necessary to look forward to, and that after all it was his just inheritance that was now coming to him. And John had not stopped her to-day. It was all true enough. The poor boy had been an interruption to the course of events, and now things were returning to their natural course.

He had a soft heart, and it was sore for Mar; but Letitia had reason on her side, and what she said was not to be refuted or despised.

She was very busy that day, not going out for her drive or receiving any visitors, not even any of the anxious inquirers who came to beg for a little more information than the bulletin gave — the clerical people about, and the nearest neighbours, whom hitherto she had allowed to enter; very busy in her own room planning out a great many things. It would make a change to everybody—a different style of living, a great extension and amplification would now not only be possible but necessary. She put it all down on paper, making out her arrangements systematically, which was an exercise that she loved. If the poor boy lingered for a week longer that would make no difference after all. She had promised to Duke to send for him if Mar became worse; but she decided that she would not do so, for what would be the good? Mar was far too weak to take an interest in any one, perhaps even to recognise his cousin. And Letitia felt that she could not bear the noisy grief with which her son would no doubt receive

the news, which was the best news for him that could possibly be. It was bad enough to see Letty with her red eyes moping about the house, and Tiny devoting herself to her lessons as if the mortification of her soul over them was more appropriate to the crisis than anything she cared for. Little fools! who did not know what was to their advantage! But even to them it would not make the difference it would make to Duke. For Duke there could be no doubt it was the one thing to be desired; yet Letitia knew he would make a greater fuss than even the girls were doing, and this she could not bear.

Next morning she was a little later than usual in leaving her room. She had not slept well. Her mind had been so full of all that she had to do. It was not anxiety that kept her awake, for anxiety had almost left her in the certainty of what was going to happen; but merely the preoccupation of her mind and the responsibility on her shoulders of seeing that everything was done in this emergency so as to secure the approval of the world. Though her mind was full of exultation, she was most anxious not to show it; not to be

spoken of as heartless or worldly. A slight fear that she had committed herself to the attendants of the sick-room, and that they had penetrated her true feelings, troubled her a little; but what did a couple of nurses matter? She was so late that morning that she did not as usual see the night nurse, with her lugubrious countenance, shaking her head as she went to take her necessary rest. Letitia liked the night nurse best. She had always thought the other too hopeful; but what did it matter now what one thought or the other? She went direct to the sick-room when she left her own, putting on as she went the necessary solemnity of countenance with which to receive what there could be no doubt would be bad news. It startled her a little to hear an unusual murmur of voices in the ante-room where the doctor was in the habit of pausing to give his directions. She could not hear what they said, but there was something in the tone of the consultation which struck her, like a sudden dart thrown from some unseen hand. What did it mean? She went into the room quickly, her composure disturbed, though she would not allow herself to think there was any reason.

What reason could there be? The first thing Letitia saw was the nurse crying—the cheerful nurse—the fool of an optimist who had always said he would get better. Ah! all was over, then? This woman had the folly to allow herself to get interested in the case; and, besides, might well be crying too for the end of a good job. A spirit of malice and fierce opposition somehow sprang up in Letitia's mind, and prompted this mean thought. Yes, it was the end of a good job, of good feeding and good pay, and very easy work. No wonder she cried; and to make herself interesting, too, in the doctor's eyes. This flashed through Mrs. Parke's mind in a second, while she was walking into the room. It broke up her calm, but rather with a fierce impulse of impatience and desire to take the hussy by the shoulders than with any real fear.

The doctor was stooping over the table writing a prescription. A prescription! What did they want with such a thing now? He looked up when he heard her step. His face was beaming. He put down his pen and came forward, holding out both hands.

"I have the best of news for you this morning, my dear lady," he said.

Letitia was too much startled to speak. She would not, could not permit herself to believe her eyes. She drew her hands impatiently from his clasp.

"The crisis has come—and passed," he said. "The fever has gone. I find his temperature almost normal, and the pulse quite quiet."

"What?" said Letitia. She could not believe her ears. She had no time to regulate her countenance to look as if she were glad. Her jaw fell, her eyes glared. "What?" she said, and she could say no more.

"I do not wonder you are overcome. I feel myself as if it were too much. Sit down and take a moment to recover——"

She sat down mechanically and glared at him.

Her feeling was that if there had been a knife on the table she would have struck at him with it—a sharp one that would have turned that smile into a grimace and made an end of it. Too much! The fever gone, *gone!* She panted for breath, fiercely, like a wild beast.

"It is wonderful, but it is true," said Dr. Barker. He added after a moment: "It is curious the different ways we take it. This good little woman, who always hoped the best —cries; and you, Mrs. Parke, you——"

"Do you mean that he will live?" Letitia said.

"I hope so—I hope so. The only danger now is weakness; if we can feed him up and keep him quiet. It is all a question of strength——"

"You have said that ever since you were called in."

"Ah, yes, that is true, but in a different sense. Strength to struggle with a fever is one thing; strength to pick up when it is gone is another. Yesterday, every moment the fire was flaming, burning out his life—now every moment is a gain. Look at him. He's asleep. He hasn't been asleep, to call sleeping—not honest sleep—for days and nights."

All this was but as the blowing of the wind to Letitia. She did not hear the words. She heard only over and over again, "the fever is gone——" But by this time she had begun to call her strength to her, to remember dully

that she must not betray herself. She interrupted the doctor in the midst of his phrase.

"Do you mean that he will live?" she said again.

"As long, I hope," said the doctor promptly, "as his best friends could desire."

"I don't seem to understand," Letitia said. "I thought all hope was over. I thought he was dying. Why did you make me think so—and my husband, too?"

"I am sorry if I have given you unnecessary pain, Mrs. Parke——"

"Oh, unnecessary! it was all unnecessary, I suppose. You have—you have frightened us for nothing, Dr. Barker; given us such days—and nights." She broke into a little wild laugh. "And all the time there was nothing in it!" she cried.

The nurse had dried her eyes and was staring at this strange exhibition, and Letitia had begun to perceive that she had got out of her own control, and could not recover the command of her words and looks. She had been so taken by surprise, so overwhelmed by the sudden shock that the commotion in her

brain was like madness. It was all she could do not to shriek out, to fly at the spectators like a wild cat. How dared they look and see what she had not the strength to conceal?

"I will go," she said, "and call John; he will tell you what he thinks," with the impulse of a maddened woman to bring a man's strength into her quarrel and punish her adversary. What she thought John could do to Dr. Barker she did not know; and indeed she did not go to tell John. She returned to her room which she had left only a few minutes before, and from which she chased the frightened housemaids with a stamp on the floor which made them fly wildly, leaving brooms and dusters behind. The windows were all open, the sunshine bursting in in a great twinkling of light after yesterday's rain. She locked the door that she might be alone, and closed the windows one after another with a sound like thunder. To give expression to the rage that devoured her was something, a necessity, the only way of getting out her passion. The fever gone, the fever gone! the fever which was her friend, which had worked for her, which had promised everything—everything that her heart desired.

And they looked her in the face and told her it was gone! the fools and hypocrites, that vile woman crying in her falseness, the man triumphing over her, pretending to congratulate her when he must have known—— How could they help knowing? They must have known! They had done it on purpose to make her betray herself, to surprise her thoughts, to exult over her. And she had been so sure, so easy in her mind, so certain that everything was going well! Oh, oh!—her breath of rage could command no more expression than that common monosyllable. She could not appeal to God as people do in such wild shocks of passion. It was not God who could be appealed to. The other, perhaps, if she had known how — there are times when devil-worship might be a relief if it could be done.

"My God!" said Dr. Barker, who was not so restrained. "She is wild with disappointment and rage. Did she wish the boy to die?"

"Oh, doctor—she wished her own boy to be in his place," said the nurse, who perhaps had a semi-maternal light upon the matter.

The doctor kept on shaking his head as he finished his prescription.

"Don't wake him for this or anything—not even for food; but give him the food as I told you."

"I know, I know," said the nurse, on whom the over-strain of her nerves was telling, too; "don't you think I know, sir, how important it is?"

"Don't you go off, too—don't leave him for a moment. Avoid all noise or discussion. Try and keep every one out, especially——" He did not finish his sentence, but it was unnecessary.

"All I can do, doctor—all I can do. But Mrs. Parke is the mistress of the house."

"She will not come back again," he said, "she will be in a terrible fright when she knows how she betrayed herself. Poor thing! as you say, it was to put her boy in his place. They were wild before when this boy was born. Well, perhaps there is some excuse for them."

"But you will come back to-night?"

"I should think so, indeed," he said, "and before to-night. And I shall see John Parke as I go."

But by that strange influence which nobody can explain, before the doctor left the room the news had somehow flashed through the house. The fever gone! John Parke came out into the hall as Dr. Barker came downstairs. "Is it true?" he said. It would be vain to assert that there was not a dull throb which was not of pleasure or gratitude through John Parke's being when that rumour had come to him. The cup was dashed from his lips again, and this time for ever. He had to pause a moment in the library, where he was sitting, thinking involuntarily of the new life, to gulp down something—which shamed him to the bottom of his heart. But when he came out to meet the doctor that very shock had brought all his tenderer feelings back. "Is it true?" he said with a quiver of emotion in his voice. And at that moment Letty came flying in from the park and flung herself upon his neck, and kissed him like a whirlwind. "Oh, papa, Mar's better!" she said, her voice between a soft shout and song of joy ringing through the great house. There was no doubt, no hesitation in Letty's rapture

and thankfulness. And it was with almost as true a heart, notwithstanding his momentary pang of feeling, that John grasped the doctor's hand and said "Thank God."

How the news ran through the house! It was known before it was ever spoken at all to the cook, who immediately rose from the retirement in which she was considering her menu, and ordered a delicate young chicken to be prepared to make soup. "I know what's wanted after a fever. Something hevery hour," said that dignitary. It swept up like a breeze to the housemaids upstairs busy with their work. "Oh, that's what's put the Missis in such a passion," they said with unerring logic.

Tiny, released from her lessons by the same instinctive consciousness of something, danced a wild jig round the hall to the tune of "Mar's better. Mar's better!" all her hair floating about her, and her shoes coming off in her frenzy. And thus nature and human feeling held the day and reigned triumphant, notwithstanding the fierce tragedy, indescribable, terrible—a passion which rent the very soul,

and to which no crime, no horror was impossible, which raged and exhausted itself in the silence, shut up with itself and all devilish impulses in the best room, in the bosom of the mistress of the house.

CHAPTER XII

LETITIA was a long time in her room, and was not visible at all downstairs during the moment of gladness which changed the aspect of everything. Her door remained locked all the morning, and the housemaids were shut out, unable to "do" the room, which was the most curious interruption of all the laws of life. The bed was not made, nor anything swept nor dusted at noon, when she appeared downstairs —a thing which had never happened before in the house, which never happens in any respectable house except in cases of illness. Missis' room, too, the most important of all! Nobody saw what went on inside in those two long hours. Perhaps only John divined the struggle which was going on in his wife's mind, and he but imperfectly, having little in his own nature of the poison in hers. And John took

very good care not to disturb Letitia. He would neither go himself nor let Letty go to make sure that her mother knew the good news about Mar, or to see if she were ill or anything wrong. She was sure to know, he said; and no doubt she had something to do which kept her in her room. But there was also no doubt that he was somewhat nervous himself at her long disappearance. Two hours she was invisible, which for the mother of a family and the mistress of a house is a very long time. When she came downstairs she had her bonnet on and was going out. She had ordered the brougham though it was a very bright and warm day, and announced that she was going to Ridding for some shopping she had to do, but wanted no one to go with her—nor were they to wait luncheon for her should she be late.

"You have heard, of course, Letitia, about Mar," John said, as he came out with his old-fashioned politeness to put his wife into the carriage.

"Is there anything new about Mar?" she said, with a sort of disdain.

"Oh, mamma, he's better! the fever is

gone, he is going to get well," cried Tiny, who was still dancing about the hall.

"Is that all?" said Mrs. Parke. "I heard that hours ago"—and she drove away without a smile, without a word of satisfaction, or even pretended satisfaction—her face a blank as if it had been cut out of stone. They watched the carriage turn the corner into the avenue with a chill at their hearts.

"Was mamma angry?" Tiny asked.

John Parke made no answer to his child's question, but went back to the library, and took up his paper with a heavy heart. He had felt it himself, more shame to him, more or less: a sort of horrible pang of disappointment: but she—it troubled him to divine how she must be feeling it. What awful sensations and sentiments were in her heart? It was not for herself, John said, trying to excuse her—it was for Duke and for him. If she only would understand that he did not mind, that he was glad, very glad, that his brother's son was getting better, that Mar was far too much like his own child to make his recovery anything but a happy circumstance! John's heart ached for that unmoving, fixed face. Oh, if she could be

persuaded that neither Duke nor he would have been happy in the promotion that came through harm to Mar!

Letitia sank back in the corner of the brougham where nobody could see. She had been in almost a frenzy of rage and pain, walking about the room, throwing herself on the sofa and even on the floor in the abandonment of her fierce misery, hurting herself like a passionate child. No shame, no pride had restrained her. She had locked her door and closed her windows and given herself up to the paroxysm which would have been shameful if any one had seen it—yet which gave a certain horrible relief to the sensations that rent her to pieces. To have it all snatched from her hands again when she had made up her mind to it, when everything was so certain! To be proved a fool, a fool, again trusting in a chance which never would come! It seemed to Letitia that God was her enemy, and a malignant one, exulting in her disappointment, laughing at her pangs. She was too angry, too cruelly outraged to be content with thinking of chance, or that it was her luck, as some people say. She wanted some one to hate for it—some one whose

fault it was, whom she could revile and affront and defy to his face. The deception of circumstances, the disappointment of hopes, the cruel way in which she had been lulled into security only to be the more bitterly awakened from her illusion, made her mad. Not as Mary had been made mad, not with any confusion of mind, but with a horrible and intense subversion, a sense of being at war with everything, and living only to revenge herself upon God and man. She had revenged herself upon herself first of all, beating her head against the wall, digging her nails into her flesh, because she had been such a fool, oh, such a fool! as to believe that what she wished was to be. And then there formed in her mind an awful thought, a movement of resistance, a refusal to be overthrown. She would not, she would not allow herself to be played with, to be beaten, to be foiled, to have the cup snatched from her lips just when she was about to drink. No, she would not submit! Though God was the Master, yet there were ways of overcoming Him—yes, there were ways of overcoming. Though He said life, a human creature though so weak, if she had but courage enough, could say

death, and He would not be able to prevent it. In the madness of her disappointment and rebellion there came into Letitia's mind a suggestion, an idea. It did not seem so much in order to have her own will, and her own advantage, as in order to get the better of God, who had shaped things the other way. He thought, perhaps, there was nothing she could do, that she would have to bear it. No, then! she would not! He should see—He was a tyrant. He had the power; but there were ways of baffling Him—there was a way——

Never in all Letitia's struggles had this thought come into her mind before. Mar had been helpless in her hands for years, but her arm had never armed itself against him. She had never sought to harm him. If she had exaggerated and cultivated his weakness it had been half, as she said, in a kind of scornful precaution, that nothing might happen to him in her house, and half from a grudge, lest he should emulate her own sturdy boys, over whom he had so great and undeserved an advantage. She had never thought of harming him. After, when he was really ill, when Providence itself (for her mind could be pious

when this influence which shapes events was on her side) had seemed to arrange for his removal, as she piously said, to a better world, it would have been more than nature had not her mind rushed forward to that evidently approaching conclusion which would make so great a difference. Oh, the difference it would make! enough to deaden the sense of pity, to sharpen every covetous desire. But still she had not thought of doing anything to secure the end she desired. No, no! all the other way — nothing had been neglected, nothing refused that could help him—nothing except her desire, her strong unspoken wish, had been against him. And what had that to do with the issue one way or the other? A woman cannot pray to God that a boy may die. Thus the only unfair advantage which the intensity of her wish might have given her was taken away. On the other side they had this unfair advantage—they could pray, and pray as long as they pleased if that was any good. She had only her strong, persistent, never-suspended wish. Nothing, nothing had she done against him. She had never once thought of assisting or hastening fate.

But now that God had turned everything the wrong way and dashed the cup from her lips, and set himself against her, now in the frenzy that filled her bosom, the rage, the shame, the rebellion, the wild and overwhelming passion, a new furious light had blazed in upon the boiling waves. Ah, God was great, they said. He could restore life when everything pointed to another conclusion. He could work a miracle—but a woman could foil Him. She could kill though He made alive. A moment of time, an insignificant action—and all His healing and restoration would come to nothing. Where did it come from—that awful suggestion? How did it arise? In what way was it shaped? From what source did it come —the horrible thought? It came cutting through her mind and all her agitation in a moment, as if it had been flung into her soul from outside. It came like a flash of lightning, like an arrow, like a pointed dart that cut into the flesh. It was not there one moment, and the next it was there, dominating all the commotion, penetrating all the fever and the tumult —a master thought.

She drove along the country roads in the

corner of her carriage, seeing nothing—through the noonday sunshine and the shade of the trees, through villages and by cornfields where the storing of the harvest had begun—and heard nothing and noticed nothing. At last she pulled the string strongly and told the coachman not to go to Ridding but in the other direction to another little town, to a certain house where she had a call to make. And she made the call, and came out of the house while the coachman was walking his horses up and down, and went into the chief street of the place and made a few purchases, then returned to the house of her friend and got into the brougham and drove home. The coachman had not been aware that she had done anything but come out of the house where she had been calling when he drew up. And he drove home very quickly, having himself come out before his dinner-hour, a thing that did not please him. Letitia was very pale when she came home and tired with her long drive, but she ate her luncheon and did not again shut herself from her family—nor did she avoid speaking of Mar. She went to look at him after she had rested a little.

"But I see very little difference," she said. "He seems to me just as ill as ever, too weak to move, and scarcely opening his eyes."

"But the fever is gone," they all cried together.

Letitia shook her head. "I hope the doctor was not mistaken," she said. Her words threw a cold chill upon the household after the delight of the morning. But that was all. "Missis was always one to take the worst view of everything," the cook remarked, to whom the undeniable proof of improvement which Mar had shown by swallowing his chicken broth was a proof that needed no confirmation. She sent up a little of the same broth to Mrs. Parke, hearing that she had a headache, and received a message back to the effect that the soup was very good, and that it must be kept always going, always ready, as the young gentleman was able to take it. "But I'll try him with a bit of chicken to-morrow, no more slops," said the cook. Thus, though she shook her head and owned that she was not herself so hopeful as Dr. Barker, Letitia sanctioned more or less the satisfaction of the household, and spent the

afternoon in a legitimate way. She was frightfully pale, and complained of a headache, which she partly attributed to fatigue and partly to the sun. Yet she saw one or two people who called, and explained Mar's condition to them: "presumably so much better," she said, "but I fear, I fear the doctor takes too sanguine a view. A week hence, if all is well—— But," she said, "the strain of suspense is terrible, almost worse than anything that is certain." There were people who saw her that day who declared afterwards that they could not understand why it was said of Mrs. Parke that she had no heart. Why, if ever there was a woman who felt deeply, it was Mrs. Parke! The suspense about her poor nephew and his long illness had worn her to a shadow; it had nearly killed her—especially as, poor thing, she was not one who took a cheerful view.

Letitia paid several visits in the evening to the sick-room, or to the ante-room connected with it, after the night nurse had begun her duty. The other attendant was not in sympathy with the mistress of the house: but she stood with the night nurse at the door of the room and peered at Mar, and they mutually

shook their heads and gave each other meaning looks.

"I wish I could see him with Nurse Robinson's eyes," the attendant said, and Mrs. Parke replied with a sigh that she hoped most earnestly the doctor was not mistaken.

"For I see no difference, nurse."

"And neither do I, ma'am," said the gloomy woman. She paused for a moment, and then she added in a whisper, "I've no business to interfere, but I can't bear to see you looking so pale. I do wish, Mrs. Parke, that you would go to bed."

"I thought the same of you, nurse," said Mrs. Parke; "indeed, I wanted to offer to sit up half the night to let you have a little rest."

"Thank you very much, but I must keep to my post," the woman said.

"Then you must let me give you some of my cordial," said Mrs. Parke. "I have an old mixture that has been in the family for a long time. You must take a little of it from my hand: it will strengthen you."

There was a little argument over this, all whispered at the door of Mar's room, and at last the nurse consented. She was so touched that

when Letitia came back carrying the drink, she ventured to give Mrs. Parke a timid kiss, and to say:

"Dear lady, I wish you would go to bed yourself and get a good rest. It is almost more trying when one begins to hope, and you are frightfully pale."

Letitia took the kiss in very good part (for the nurse was a lady), and promised to go and rest. It was still early, the household not yet settled to the quiet of the night, and John had not come upstairs: so that there was nobody to note Letitia's movements, who went and came through the half-lit corridor in a dark dressing-gown, and with a noiseless foot, stealing from her own room to that of the patient. She had made this little pilgrimage several times, when, listening in the ante-room, she heard at last the heavy, regular breathing of the attendant in Mar's room, which proved to her that what she intended had come to pass. Letitia paused for a moment outside the door. She was a little light woman, still slim, even thin, as in her younger days. She moved like a ghost, making no sound; but when she perceived that all was ready for her purpose,

there was something that almost betrayed her, and that was the labouring, gasping breath of excitement, which it was all she could do to keep down. Her lungs, her heart, were so strained by the effort to be calm, that her hurried respiration came like the breath of a furnace, hot and interrupted. She stood holding on to the framework of the door, looking in from the comparative light of the room in which she stood to the shaded room in which Mar lay, with the light falling upon the table by his bedside, where were his drinks and medicines—and faintly upon the white pillow with the dark head sunk upon it, in a ghostly stillness. The nurse sat in an easy-chair behind, out of the light, with her head fallen back, wrapped in sleep, breathing regularly and deep.

Letitia stood and watched for a whole long minute, which might have been a year, peering with her white and ghastly face, like a visible spirit of evil. When she had a little subdued the panting of her heart she pushed the door noiselessly, and stole into the room. She kept her eyes upon the sleeping nurse, ready to draw back if she should move; but that was the only

interruption Letitia feared. She had left the door open for her own safe retreat. It had not occurred to her that any one could follow behind her. She went over to the bedside to the table on which the light fell. And then she stood still again for another terrible moment. Did her heart fail her, did any hand of grace hold her back? She might have done what she had to do three times over while she stood there with one hand upon her breast keeping down her panting breath. Then she put her right hand for a moment over the glass with the milk that stood ready, the drink for the sick boy. That was all. It was the affair of a moment. She might have done it in the nurse's presence, and no one would have been the wiser. When she had done it she made a step backward, meaning to pass away as she had come. But instead of moving freely through the open air she came suddenly against something, some one, who stood behind, and who grasped without a word her clenched right hand. Letitia's labouring heart leaped as if it would have burst out of her breast. There came from her a choked and horrible sound, not a cry, for she durst not cry. She kept her

senses, her consciousness by a terrible effort. No! whoever it was—if it was John, her husband, if it was one of her children who had discovered her in this awful moment—whoever it was, she would not fall down there at Mar's bedside like a murderer caught in the act. No! out of the room, at least, out of the scene — somewhere, where they might kill her if they pleased, but not there—not there!

He or she who had seized her from behind stretched a hand over her shoulder and took the milk from the table, and then the two figures in a strange, noiseless mingling, half struggle, half accord, passed from the darkened room into the light, and looked in a horror, beyond words, into each other's faces. And then all the forces of self-control could no longer restrain the affrighted heart-stricken cry—"Mary!" which came from Letitia's dry lips.

CHAPTER XIII

In the moment of that movement, half dragged by the fast and firm hold upon her, half pushing her captor, and notwithstanding the horror and panic of her arrest and discovery, Letitia had time to form in her mind the explanations she would give to John, if it were John; or if it should happen to be Letty (which was impossible—but all things are possible to guilt and mortal terror), the indignant superiority with which she would send her away. But when she twisted herself round and confronted in the light of the ante-room, which seemed a brilliant illumination after the dark chamber within, the face of Mary! Mary! Letitia's strength collapsed, her self-command abandoned her, the gasping breath came in a hoarse rattle from her throat, her jaw fell, her eyes seemed to turn upon their orbits. She hung by the

hand that held her half insensible, helpless, overwhelmed, like a bundle of clothes, as if she had no longer any sensation or impulse of her own. The only thing that kept her from falling was the grip upon her hand, and the support of the arm which Mary had put round her to reach it. She was stunned and stupefied, scarcely alive enough to be afraid, though there began to grow upon her mind by degrees a consciousness that this woman who held her had been mad—which even when she had full command of herself was what Letitia feared most in all the world. Mary was taller than her prisoner. She seemed taller now than ever she had been in her life, her eyes were shining like stars, her nostrils dilated with excitement and strong feeling, her colour coming and going. She did not speak, but with her other hand held the milk to Letitia's lips, always with her arm supporting her, as one might offer drink to a child. "Drink it," she said at last, "drink it!" in a keen whisper that seemed to cut the silence like a knife. No mercy, no pity were in Mary's eyes. She held Letitia's wrist in a grip of iron, and pressing upon her, forcing her head back, held the glass to her

lips, "drink it!—drink it!" The struggle was but a momentary one, and noiseless. They were like two shadows moving, swaying, forming but one in their speechless conflict. Then came the sudden crash of the shattered glass, as Letitia, recovering her forces in her desperation, with a sudden twist of her arm dashed it from her antagonist's hand. The contents were spilled between them, and formed a white pool upon the floor, from which, instinctively, each woman drew back; and then they stood gazing at each other again.

Letitia's every nerve was trembling with terror, physical fear surmounting the first panic of discovery, which was a terror of the mind. She expected every moment an *accès* of madness, in which she might be torn limb from limb—though at the same time calculating that the mad woman might loose her hold, and there might be a possibility of desperate flight, and of all the household on her side protecting her, and sudden relief from every terror. The nature of the emergency brought back to her after the first speechless horror her power of thought and calculation. She kept her eyes upon Mary's eyes, still wild with fright, but

awakened to a vigilant watch and keen attention to every indication of the other's looks. But this was not the Mary whom Letitia had ever seen before. Her face had cleared like a sky after rain. It was like that sky ethereally pale, exalted, with a transparence that seemed to come from some light beyond. Mary was no longer a weak woman distracted by over tenderness, by visionary compunctions, humbleness, uncertainty—but clear and strong, with the quivering, expanding nostrils, the wide open eyes and trembling lips of inspiration. She held her captive still, though she stood a little apart from her, grasping fast in her own Letitia's shut hand.

"What did you put in it," she said, "to kill my boy?"

"Mary!" Letitia panted. "Why do you try to frighten me?—your boy?—you have told me you had no boy——"

"Whom you tried to kill—before he was born—whom you drove out of my knowledge—for I was mad. I know it all now—and you did it; what did you put in that, to kill my boy?"

There came a shriek from Letitia's labour-

ing breast. The words maddened her again into frantic terror. She made a wild effort to free her hand. Though it was a shriek, and intense as the loudest outcry, it was subdued by the other terror of being heard and discovered. Between the two she hung suspended, not able altogether to coerce nature, but still keeping its expression under.

"Mary," she cried, "let me go—let me go!"

"What was it you put in it to kill him?"

"Mary! Let me go—let me go!"

"Not till you tell me; and then you shall go—where you will; away from here—away from my boy."

They were women not used to any such struggle, and feeling in the depths of their hearts that to struggle so for any reason was a shame to them; and every moment as it passed brought this consciousness more near to Mary, who in the first shock was capable of anything. Perhaps her hold loosened, perhaps Letitia felt the magnetic effect of that relaxation even before it was palpable. All at once she flung out her hand which Mary held, and threw something which was in it into the

dull small fire which smouldered in the grate, and which was kept there, notwithstanding the warmth of the July nights, for the uses of the sick-room. There was a faint clang of glass against the bars, and then the two figures separated altogether and stood apart, still gazing at each other with panting breath.

Letitia had felt that if she ever got free from the grasp that held her—if ever she could throw off the hand that was like velvet yet closed on her like iron, there was but one thing to do—to fly, to get help, to make everybody understand that Lady Frogmore, mad as she had once been before, had burst in on her and tried to kill her. But now that she had freed herself she did not take to flight as she intended. She drew away a step nearer the door, that she might retain that alternative—and kept the most watchful eye upon her antagonist, ready in a moment to fly. But she did not do so. Her breath began to come more easily. Perhaps she was relieved that the attempt had failed—which at once relaxed the tragic tension of her nerves; at all events her heart gave a leap of satisfaction that there was no proof against her. The milk spilt on the

floor had soaked into the carpet—the vial was fused into liquid metal, which could betray no one, in the fire. She had gone through a terrible moment, but it was over. She fell back upon the wall and supported herself against it, propping up the shoulders which still heaved with the storm that was past—and then she said in something like her usual voice:

"What is this all about, Lady Frogmore?"

Mary had come to herself like Letitia. The first impulse of passion and excitement failed in her, it was so unusual to her gentle bosom. She looked at this woman who stood defiant, staring at her, with a look of wonder and doubt.

"If I have done you any wrong—" she began, with a quaver in her voice; and then paused. "You know," she began again, "that I have not done you wrong. You stole into the room in the dark, you put something in his drink. Oh," cried Mary, clasping her hands, "if I had not come at that moment, if God had not sent me, my boy might have been murdered. How dare you stand and face me there? Go, go!" She stamped her foot upon the floor. "Go! Don't come near my child again."

"Your child," Letitia said, with a smile of scorn. "You who never had one! You have said so a hundred times."

Mary's lips opened as if to reply—then she paused.

"Who am I to be angry!" she said. "I have given her cause to speak. Oh, go," she cried, "go. I will not accuse you. You know what you have done, and I know, and that will separate us for ever and ever. No one, no one shall come near my child to harm him again, for his mother will be there. Go, you wicked woman, go."

"You are mad," cried Letitia; "who would believe a mad woman? Say what you please, do you think any one will listen to you? You are mad, mad! I'll have you put in an asylum. I'll have you shut up. I'll— Oh, save me from her, she's mad, she's mad!" cried Letitia, with a shriek. There was some one coming—and Mary had put forth her hands as if to seize her again. Letitia ran past her to the door, and there stood for a moment panting, vindictive. "Do you think they will leave him with a mad woman?" she cried, then gave another shriek and fled; for it was not John as she thought who was

coming to protect her, but another cloaked figure like a repetition of Mary's, who appeared on the other side. She did not stop for further parley, but ran wildly, with the precipitation of terror, into the long, silent, dim corridor.

"What has happened? What is it?" said Agnes, terrified, going up to her sister who stood with clasped hands in the middle of the room, the light falling upon her face. Mary put her arms round her, giving her a close momentary embrace, which was half joy to see some one come who would stand by her, and half an instinctive motion to support herself and derive strength from her sister's touch.

"I came in time," she said. "I saved him. He is safe. I will never leave my child again. Oh, never while she is here ——"

"What is it? What is it, Mary?"

Mary told her story, leaning upon her sister, holding her fast, whispering in her ear. Even Letitia's cries and vituperations had been subdued, whispers of passion and desperation, no more. But to Agnes it seemed an incredible tale, a vision of the still confused and wandering brain. She soothed Mary, patting her shoulder with a trembling hand, saying:

"No, no. You must have dreamt it. No, no, my dear: oh, that was not the danger," in a troubled voice.

Mary detached herself from her sister, putting Agnes away gently, but with decision. She took off the bonnet which she had worn all this time, and tied the veil which had dropped from it over her head. Then she went into the inner room without a word. To pass into that silent and darkened room out of the agitation of the other was like going into another world. The breathing of the nurse in her deep sleep filled it with a faint regular sound. The patient did not stir. Mary sat down at the foot of the bed, like a shadow. Her figure in its dark dress seemed to be absorbed in the dimness and pass out of sight altogether. Agnes stood at the door and looked into the chamber full of sleep and silence, weighed down by the mystery about her. Had that fantastic, horrible scene really happened, or had it been but a dream? There were still traces on the carpet of something white that had soaked into it, and her foot had crushed a portion of the broken glass upon the floor. Was it true? Was it possible it could be true?

She stood wondering on the verge of the stillness that closed over the sick-room in which her sister had disappeared. It is strange at any time to look into a chamber thus occupied. The feeble patient in the bed noiseless in the slumber of weakness, the watcher by his side invisible in the gloom, a point of wakeful, anxious life among those shadows. The nurse sleeping heavily in the background, invisible, added another aching circumstance to the mystery—nurses of that class do not sleep so. Was it true? Could it be true?

She was called back to the common passage of affairs by a faint knock at the door of the ante-room, and going to it found Ford, conducted by a sleepy maid who had been roused to prepare Lady Frogmore's room. "Where is my lady, Miss Hill?" said the anxious Ford. "I can't find my lady. It's late and she's tired, and I must get her to bed."

"No, Ford; she will not leave her son to-night."

"Oh, Miss Hill, her son! She will die of it, or she will go wrong again, and what will everybody say to me for allowing this? She must come to bed. She must come to bed!"

"No one can make her do so, Ford—the nurse has gone to sleep, some one is wanted here. I will stay by her, and if I can get her to go to bed I will."

"You will both kill yourselves," cried Ford, aggrieved, "and what will be the advantage in that? You may, if you please, Miss Hill, I have no authority; but my lady, my lady! It is as much as her life is worth."

Agnes bade the maid bring her some shawls, and lie down herself. She went softly into the sick-room and put a wrap round Mary's shoulders, who raised her pale face, just visible through the dark in its whiteness, to kiss her in token of thanks. Agnes permitted her hungry heart an anxious look at the patient and satisfied herself, to the relief of various awful doubts that had been growing on her, that he breathed softly and regularly, though almost inaudibly. She endeavoured in vain to rouse the sleeping woman behind, and then she herself retired into the ante-room. Was it true? Could it be possible? As she sat there, realising the extraordinary way in which Mary and she had been allowed to come in and take possession—when she perceived that no one

came near them, that Letitia did not return, did not even send a servant, but gave up the patient and the charge of him without a word, without the slightest notice of their possible wants, or care for them, a sense of the strangeness of it all grew upon her. Could Mary's tale be true? Oh, God, could it be true? The woman sleeping so deeply, not to be roused—the house fallen into complete silence as if every one had gone to bed. Mary and she, as it seemed, the only two waking in all the place. Could it be true? Could it be true?

An hour or two later the scene had changed, the sick-room was faintly illuminated through the closed curtains with the light of the morning. And Agnes, looking in through the half-open doorway, met Mary's look, her face like the clear, pale morning, a sort of ecstasy in her wakeful eyes. She did not seem to have moved since Agnes threw the shawl round her, nor had she closed those widely-opened eyes. When she had given her sister that look they returned to the bed where Mar's young wasted countenance was now dimly visible. There was almost a chill

in that blue dawning of the new day; a something clear and keen above illusion, the light of reality, yet the light of a vision. As Agnes looked, everything returned to its immovable stillness again. The pale boy sleeping, the pale mother watching, the nurse behind come into sight with her head thrown back, a potent witness in her insensibility. Was it true? Could it be true?

CHAPTER XIV

JOHN PARKE woke next morning to see his wife in her dressing-gown, moving vaguely about the room, a shadow against the full summer light that came in at all the windows. He could not make out at first what she was doing, prowling about in a curious monotonous round from window to window, pausing to look out, as it seemed, at the edge of the blind, first of one, then of another. He watched her for a little while in vague alarm. During all this time a vague but painful suspicion was in John's mind. He knew better than any one how she had looked forward to a new state of affairs. Had she not drawn even him to that vile anticipation, to plan and calculate upon the boy's death? The pain of the thought that he had done so made more intense his sense of the terrible revulsion in her mind when all

these horrible hopes came to an end. He was not a man who naturally divined what was going on in the minds of others, but the movement in his own, on this occasion, and the instinctive knowledge which long years of companionship had vaguely, magnetically conveyed to him about his wife—not a matter of reflection or reason, but simply of impression—kept a dull light about Letitia which surrounded no other person upon earth. Something like sympathy mingled with and increased his power of comprehending during this dreadful crisis. How would she make up her mind to it, he asked himself, notwithstanding the horror and shame with which he thought of the calculations he himself had been seduced into sharing. He knew very well how little she liked to be foiled, how she struggled against disappointment, and got her will in defiance of every combination of circumstances. During all the previous day he had been very uneasy, certain that in her long absence she was planning something, wondering what she could plan that would have any effect upon the present state of affairs—fearing—he knew not what. John could not allow himself to think

that his wife would contemplate harming the boy. Oh, no, no! such a thought was not in his mind. Letitia had her faults. She had never been kind to Mar. She had thought of him as an interloper, as an intruder, as supplanting Duke—and she had not concealed her feeling. But harm him — by so much as a touch. Oh, no! no! Nevertheless, John had been very uneasy all day, and even in his sleep this gnawing discomfort had not left him. He had dreamed of death-beds and dying persons, and of strange scenes of chaos in which she was always present, though he knew not for what purpose. And when he woke suddenly and saw her wandering about the room in the high clear morning light like a ghost, all the uneasiness of the previous day, all the troubled dreams of the night came back upon his heart. He watched her for a minute without making any sign, and then he called "Letitia!" His voice made her start violently —but she came towards him at once, wrapping her dressing-gown round her as though she felt cold.

"Isn't it very early? Why are you prowling about at this hour?"

"Yes, I suppose it's early. I couldn't sleep —one cannot always sleep when one would."

"You are not such a bad sleeper as you think," said John—as have said before him, in the calm of experience, the partners of many a restless wife and husband. "And I wish," he added impatiently, "that you'd let me sleep, at least."

Instead of quenching him by a sharp word, as was Letitia's wont, she came towards the bedside and sat down, turning her back to the light. "John," she said, "there has been a great deal happening while you have been asleep."

"What?" he cried. He raised himself up on his elbow, terrified, threatening. "Letitia, for God's sake, don't tell me that anything has happened to the boy."

"Oh, the boy!" she cried, with an impatience that was balm to his heart. Then she went on, not looking at him, "Fancy, who arrived last night—Mary, looking for her child——"

"Lady Frogmore!"

"Mary—and calling for her child—she who always denied that she ever had one. She came flying upon me in his room, and seized

hold of me and dragged me out of it; mad—mad—as mad again—as—as a March hare." Her lips parted in a harsh laugh. "I believe she would have torn me to pieces if I had not taken to my heels. You know there is nothing in the world I am so frightened of as madness—nothing! I took to my heels——"

"Wait a bit," said John, "wait, I don't understand. She came in the middle of the night to see her child?"

"Agnes must have put her up to it. Agnes must have got it into her head at last that she had a child."

"And you were in his room? What were you doing in his room, Letitia? You have never nursed him. You were asleep when I came upstairs."

She gave him a momentary glance—half of defiance, half of alarm—and yet she had thought of this, too. "I fancied the nurse looked sleepy—the night nurse, you know, John—I thought she looked drowsy, and I stole back to listen. Well I did, for she was asleep. I went in to see that all was right for the night—his drink——"

Even Letitia's nerve was not enough for

this. She shivered. "It is cold at this hour in the morning," she said, her teeth chattering.

"Did you give him anything to drink?" John would not have dared to confess to himself what dread apprehension went through his heart. And it was dreadful for him to talk of it, though she was so wonderful in self-command.

"I?—oh, no. I gave him nothing. I have not nursed him, you know. I saw that all was there that he could want, and was going to rouse the nurse, when somebody came upon me and took me by the shoulders. At first I thought it was you."

"Why should you think that I would take you by the shoulders?" His suspicion was not quenched, but seized upon every word.

"Yes," she said, "why should I? I thought, perhaps, you were angry with me for being there at all."

"Why should I be angry with you," he asked again, "for being there?" never taking his eyes from her face.

On her part she never looked towards him, but continued impatiently, "I don't suppose I thought of the whys and the wherefores.

I thought it was you, that was all. And when I found it was Mary—I don't know whether she dragged me out or I pushed her out. Above all I feared a noise to wake the boy."

John gave her a long searching look. He did not want to find her out. He wanted her to clear herself from all suspicions, from all doubt. "Ah, the boy!" he said, with a long-drawn breath, "the poor boy! Did you wake him? It might have been as much as his life was worth."

"You think of nothing else," she said. Then with a sort of indulgence to his weakness, "The boy — never stirred." She breathed forth heavily a sigh—was it of thankfulness?

"I suppose he was sleeping," she added, with a sort of bravado, "I did not look."

"Good God!" cried John, springing up, "was there any doubt? Had you any doubt?" He seized his dressing-gown and thrust his arms into the sleeves, and his feet into slippers.

"Ay," cried Letitia, still without a movement, without even looking at him, "go and see. Nothing would make me face that woman again."

She sat idly playing with a ring upon her

finger, turning it round and round, but neither raised her head nor looked at him, though he paused before her with again the searching look of anxiety which he dared not define.

"Letitia," he said, "for God's sake what do you mean? There is something in all this I don't understand."

"Ah, don't I speak plain enough?" she said. "It's Mary come back, and as mad as a March hare."

"And you left her—a woman—in that state—alone with the boy, just out of the jaws of death? What's that on your gown?"

She looked at it, bending forward to see—a long streak as of something spilt. The stain was stiff, giving a rigid line to the stuff—and what John suspected, feared it to be, cannot be put into words. His eyes grew wild with terror, and his voice hoarse, as he repeated:

"On your gown! What is it? What is it?"

"Oh, the milk!" Letitia said. It brought everything before her, and a shiver ran over her again; but also a laugh, which, though tuneless enough, gave the distracted man by her side some comfort, for she could not have laughed surely if it had been—— "We spilt

it between us," Letitia said, "and mad as she was she drew back for that, not to spoil her dress. She had her senses enough for that."

He stood in front of her for a moment, undecided what to do, when she suddenly raised her head and cried sharply, "John, why don't you go and see?"

"I can't understand you," he said. "You mean more than I know."

She looked up at him again and laughed in a way that froze his blood. "Don't I always?" she said, with a tone of contempt. Then added, stamping on the floor, "Go—go and see what has happened. I will never see that woman again."

John went softly along the corridor, half dressed, ashamed, miserable. Something had happened more than he could understand, perhaps more than he would ever understand. The house was all silent, wrapt as in a garment in the morning sunshine, which came in by the great staircase windows and flooded everything. It was still very early. His step made a sound which ran all through and through it. He could not be noiseless as the women were, who stole about, and met, and had their en-

counters, and nobody was ever the wiser. He thought it was in the middle of the night that this arrival must have occurred which seemed to him like a dream, and which, as he passed through the sleeping house and felt the stillness of it, he began to think must be but some wild fancy of his wife's, something which could not be true. When he pushed open the door of the ante-room a dark figure rose hurriedly out of a chair, and met him with the dazed look of a person disturbed and half asleep. "Miss Hill!" he cried. Then it was true!

She put up her hand and said "Hush." Then, after a moment, "He is asleep, like a baby; he has never stirred."

"Are you sure—that he is asleep?"

"Oh, I thought that myself," she cried, understanding him. "He was so quiet. Yes, yes, he is asleep; breathing faintly, but you can hear him. Oh, safe and sound asleep!"

"My wife told me—his mother——"

"She is there," said Agnes, beckoning him to the door of the inner room. He stood and looked in for a moment, with his clouded and troubled face, leaning against the lintel. Mary's ear had been caught by the sound. She looked

up and met his eyes with that ethereal clearness of countenance, the exaltation of her aroused and awakened soul. She looked him in the face with a mild serenity and peace and smiled in recognition, then turned her eyes to the bed as if to show him the boy softly sleeping there. Behind, the nurse still slept in the easy-chair. To John it seemed as if it were all a dream, of which there was no explanation. How did it come about that the sick-room had passed into the keeping of these two, arriving mysteriously during the night, whom his wife must have risen from his side to receive, of whom he had heard nothing? The nurse asleep, all the usual faces gone, the mother who had disowned him sitting in that attitude of love by Mar's side—what did it all mean?

"This is all very strange," he said, drawing back from the door. "I find you here in possession whom I thought far away — and the mother who was so estranged. Did you come down from the skies? Is it safe to leave her there? Is she——"

Agnes looked at the man who was comparatively little known to her, who was a man,

frightening and disturbing in his strange undress in the midst of the silent house. She was an elderly single woman, unaccustomed to give any account of herself to strange men, and her weariness and all the unusual circumstances told upon her. Her lips quivered and her eyes filled.

"Oh," she said, "Mr. Parke, do not think we meant any — any reproach. Things have happened that have brought my sister to her full senses — and to remember everything. I could not keep her from her boy—you would not keep her from her boy——"

"Not if she is sane; not if it is safe," said John. He looked in again through the half-closed door. Once more Mary's keen ear caught the sound; and again she turned towards him her face, which was like the morning sky. She had never been beautiful in her best and youngest days. Now, with her gray hair ruffled by the night's vigil, her mild eyes cleared from any film that had been upon them, lambent and inspired with watchful love, her look overawed the anxious spectator. He stepped back again with a sort of apologetic humility. "I don't understand it," he said. "You seem

to have some meaning among you that I don't know: but I cannot be the one to disturb her. I hope — I hope that I am making no mistake——"

"You are making no mistake, Mr. Parke," said Agnes. "Mar was my child more than hers; he was my baby. My heart was nearly broken, for I thought he was dying when I came here last night. But I trust him in his mother's hands. I give place to her because it is her right. Do you think I would leave my boy to her if she were not in her full senses, ready to defend him, ready to protect him——?"

She stopped, choked with the sobs which, in her great exhaustion and emotion, Agnes could no longer entirely keep down.

"To defend him—to protect him? From what? from what?" John said.

"Oh, how can I tell? From the perils and dangers of the night; from carelessness and any ill wish."

John's voice was choked as that of Agnes had been. "There is no ill wish," he said— "none—to Mar in this house."

He saw, as he spoke, the traces on the

floor of something spilt like that on his wife's gown, and some fragments of the broken glass which had escaped Agnes' scrutiny. He did not know what they meant. He was not clever, nor had he any imagination to divine; but something went through him like a cold blast, chilling him to the heart. He paused a moment, staring at the floor, and the words died away on his lips.

When John returned to his wife's room Letitia was in bed, and to all appearance fast asleep. The poor man was glad, if such a word could be applied to anything he was capable of feeling. He withdrew softly into his dressing-room, and sat there for a long time with his head in his hands and his face hidden. What to think of the mysterious things that had passed that night he did not know.

CHAPTER XV

THE sun was very bright on that July morning. When should it be bright if not in that crown of summer? It triumphed over all the vain attempts of curtains drawn and shutters closed to keep it out, and streamed in in rays doubly intense for these precautions, at every crevice. One of these resplendent rays fell upon the dress of the watcher who sat by Mar's bedside. When he opened his eyes first this was what caught them. The dress was not the black dress and white apron of the nurse. It was gray, of a soft silvery tone, with a pattern woven in the silk, and a satin sheen which caught the light. Mar, in the dreamy state of his weakness, admired it like a child. How soft the colour was, and the raised flowers which shone almost white in that wonderful

ray of sunshine! His pleasure in it suited the dreamy state of feeble well-being in which he lay gradually getting awake. It seemed a kindness to put that pretty thing before him instead of the glare of the white apron on the gloom of the black gown. What was it, though, so near his bed?

He raised himself and beheld the most astonishing sight. Not the nurse at all with whose aspect he was so familiar, but a lady. Her face was shrouded by her hand, and for a moment he did not recognise her. A lady in those soft, beautiful robes, in an unfamiliar pose; not easy like the accustomed nurse, who was so kind but not anxious. This figure leaned forward looking at him, intent upon him, though he could not at first make out her face. Then he perceived the gray hair curling over the hand which supported her head, and then—— He gave a little cry, "Ah!" which made her rise and come close to him. "Ah!" he said in his surprise; and then, with a curious, long-drawn breath, "Am I dead?"

"Oh, no, no."

"I know: not dead, for I'm living and

talking, but I must have died, I suppose? And —and you, too?"

She came up closer and closer, and took his hand, and began to cry, clasping it within her own. "Why should that be? Why should that be?" she said.

"Because," said Mar, groping with his faint, half awakened senses and intelligence still in the strangest maze, "because—you are here."

"Do you know me?"

He did not answer, but in those large, humid eyes of weakness the answer was so plain.

"Know you!" they seemed to say; "what do I know but you?"

Mary dropped upon her knees by the bedside, and began to kiss his hand over and over.

"I am your mother," she said, and went on repeating those words as if they were something which he would not believe. "I am your mother—I am your mother!"

They were a wonder to her, but no wonder to Mar. He smiled with the heavenly light in his eyes which belong to all, more or less,

who have come back from the gates of death; and specially to the children when they are so good, so good, as to come back. Was there ever any mother but was thankful, oh, beyond telling, to her child for coming back? He looked at her with that angelic superiority of the newly returned, saying nothing. What could he say? He had known it all his life, but had never said a word. He had thought of her, dreamed of her, longed for her, but never had said a word. Had he died it would have been without a sign of that paramount dream and longing. He had never had any sense of wrong, only of wistful wishes and a lingering, never-quenched, always visionary hope. When Mar had made up his mind, as he had done very early, many years before, that he would die, he had felt a consolation in his childish mind from the thought. God would surely let him attend upon her, be her guardian angel, though he was so little. And then when she should die too—ah, then!—she would not fail to know him. It was this old childish thought so long cherished that made him think he must have died when he saw his mother for the first time by his bedside.

But he was shy to utter that sacred word. He had dreamt of it so much, breathing it to himself like a melody which he alone had the secret of, that the thought of saying it aloud filled him with a strange trouble. And that she should kiss his hand, she! whose hem of her dress he would have been glad to kiss, troubled him; but to ask her to kiss him and not his hand, was something too bold, too hazardous to think of. He could only look at her, as he might have looked, at the moment he had so often thought of, when he took her hand to lead her out of life, her guardian angel, and she recognised him in the light of heaven.

"I am your mother," she kept saying. "Do you know me, do you know me?" laying her cheek upon his hand, kissing every wasted finger.

Mary did not wait for any answer, perhaps she did not want it. It was enough for her to make her statement clear to him, to show him who she was. She had no fear of his affection, nor any compunction as if for guilt of her own towards him. None of these things troubled her mind. She was as if she had come home from a long absence, which by

the most innocent natural causes had kept her separate from her boy. This was the way in which it seemed to affect her. She was not aware that she had been in fault or required forgiveness — or that there was any special harm or misfortune in it. She had arrived in time. That was the conviction warm at her heart. She had come in time. Her boy had been in danger, and she had arrived in time to save him. Had there been any sense in her mind of guilt towards him, it would all have been driven away by this happy thought. She had been not a moment too late, exactly in time. Had she arrived earlier she might never have known the risk he ran, or the supreme need there was of her presence to protect him—and had she arrived late, he might have been lost. She came by the providence of God exactly in time.

Agnes outside heard the murmur of the voices, and fearing she knew not what, that her sister might say too much and disturb the equilibrium of the patient at so important a moment, came stealing into the room to prevent any overstrain of emotion. Poor Agnes had been the only mother Mar had

ever known. All that he knew of maternal love and tenderness was from her, and he was to her the most cherished thing in the world, the apple of her eye. But when she came in thus upon the pair she was not welcome to either. She was a disturbing influence, a third party. They did not want her. This is so often the fate of the third that she was not surprised, but it cannot be said that she liked it. It requires a quite celestial knowledge of the heart and charity for all its waywardness to enable one to see one's self set aside and another preferred who has not done half so much to deserve that preference. Mar, indeed, hailed her more openly than he had done his mother, holding out his disengaged hand to her, drawing her nearer; but it was more as a witness of his blessedness than as the cause of any part of it. And Mary got up from her knees as her sister came in, as if now the intimate things of the heart must be put away, and the ordinary ones attended to. She bent over the bed and kissed his cheek, and then she returned to the cares of the nursing, which all this time had been laid aside.

"The question now is what we should give him," said Mary. "He must want something. It would have been wrong to disturb him in that beautiful sleep, but now that he is awake he must have something. What shall we do? Go down and forage for him, or wake this poor woman, who will be ready to kill herself——"

"I cannot be sorry for her," said Agnes, "to sleep all through the night when she could not know how much she might be wanted."

"It is not her fault; and it will be dreadful for her when she knows. Do you think his eyes will bear a little more light? Do you feel the light upon your eyes, my dear boy? Open that window there where it will shine upon him—Ah," Mary cried, turning round upon the nurse, who began to move and stir. Mar felt less shy when his mother's eyes were not upon him. He was able to take a little timid initiative of his own. He put his two thin hands upon hers, which was so soft and white and round. How soft it was to touch, a hand like velvet—no, a hand much softer than any vulgar image—like a mother's hand, and no less; and drawing it towards him by

degrees, shyly, yet with increasing boldness, got it to his pillow and laid his cheek upon it, holding it there as sometimes an infant will do. Mary withdrew her eyes from the woman, who was slowly coming to herself. She looked at her boy, pillowing his head upon her hand with that infantile movement, and a tender delight filled her heart. With her disengaged hand she pulled her sister's sleeve, and attracted her attention. Mar gave them both a look of blessedness in his ecstasy of weakness and satisfaction, and then closed his eyes and lay as if he slept, his cheek upon that softest of pillows, and happiness in his heart. Agnes stood by and looked on, the old maid, the grim old spinster (as young men had been known to call her), with a pang which was almost insupportable, made up of pain and of pleasure. Ah, more than pleasure and more than pain—the bliss of heaven to see them thus restored to each other, and all the claims of nature set right, and yet, for she was but human, a sharp stab like a knife to see how little a part she herself had in it. She who alone had been Mar's mother, who had worshipped the boy and was nothing to him. This keen

cut forced a tear into the corner of each eye, which it filled and through which she saw everything, a medium which enlarged and softened, yet somewhat blurred the picture which was so full of consolation.

At this moment the nurse sprang to her feet with a cry. She said, "Where am I? What has happened?" and then, with a wild outcry subdued but shrill with misery, added, "I have been asleep. Oh, God forgive me, I have been asleep."

"There is no harm done," said Agnes coldly, advancing a step, and almost glad there was some one she could be harsh to, without wrong, "his mother has been with him all the night."

"Oh, God forgive me," said the nurse. "Oh, what will become of me—I have slept all through the night!"

"It is very true," said Mary, with her voice which was soft with great happiness, "but I don't think it is your fault. Say nothing, and we will say nothing. I have been here in your place."

"Bestir yourself, now," said Agnes, "and tell us what he ought to have."

"Oh, ladies," said the unfortunate, "I

never did such a thing before—never—never! You may not believe me, but it is true, and if he is the worse for it, oh, goodness, it will kill me! What shall I do? What shall I do?"

She came forward to the bedside wringing her hands. Her mob-cap had been pushed to one side in her sleep—an air of dissipation, of having been up all night, such as never comes to the dutiful watcher, was in her whole appearance. Tears were dropping upon her white apron, making long streaks where they fell with a splash like rain. Mar, with his cheek pillowed on his mother's hand, opened his eyes and looked at her. And there came into the too large, too lustrous eyes of the sick boy, a light that had not been in them for long, that had been rare in them at any time—the light of laughter. It was almost cruel that he should be aroused, but he was so. He raised his head a little and laughed.

"She looks so funny," he said, under his breath.

It was very good for Mar to be brought down from the superlative in this casual way by a laugh.

"Bless the boy," said Mary; "do you hear

him laugh? And bless you for making him laugh, you poor soul. He is none the worse; he has slept all the time. But make haste now, and tell us what has to be done to him: what is he to take? She is dazed still; she has not got back her senses."

"Where is the milk? Was there no milk for him? I am sure," cried the nurse, "I put it here last night."

Mary looked at Agnes; and Agnes, with a terrified glance, at her. Was it true?

"Go," said Miss Hill quietly; "don't waste a moment now, and get him some fresh. Let nobody touch it. I will go with you myself," she cried, after a moment, taking the woman by the arm. Was it true? Was it true?

"Oh," said the nurse, "don't think I'm like that. It never happened before—oh, never, never! No case of mine was ever neglected. Oh, ask the sisters at the hospital. Ask the doctors! I could die with shame — I, that always bragged that I was never sleepy. And why should I be sleepy, after getting my good rest?"

"How do you account for it?" said Agnes, still stern.

They were going down the great staircase together in the full flush of morning light.

"I don't know how to account for it. Mrs. Parke brought me something which she said was restoring, in case I had a hard night. I never have taken anything, but she seemed so kind, and, perhaps, she didn't know. I thought I oughtn't to take it, but she seemed so kind. Oh, madam, don't think badly of me. I'll go back to the hospital to-day and send another. Nurse Newman or Nurse Sandown, or any of them that I looked down upon would be better than me."

Agnes bade her dry her eyes and put her cap straight. "There is no harm done, and nothing shall be said. But you must learn a lesson from what has happened." Her own voice sounded harsh and unfeeling to Agnes as she spoke. She would have liked to be angry, to pour out some of the pain in her heart in indignation and reproach. Could it be true, then? No dream of Mary's, but dreadful truth. She went down with the wondering woman all the way to the dairy, where a pail of foaming milk had just been brought in, and took some of it herself back

to the sick-room. So far as this went they were safe, but for all the rest what was to be done? Agnes went a great deal further than Mary in her panic and horror. Could they venture to give him anything, even a glass of water, in a house where such a thing had been done—if, indeed, it was true and not a dream?

"We must get him out of the house," she said. "We must take him home. I brought this myself from the dairy where it had been brought straight from the cow. I drank some to test it. We must get him away. We must take him home."

"But he is not able to go. It will be many a day yet before he can even leave his bed."

"Then God be praised!" cried Agnes in her excitement. "I can cook. We could both do that in the old days. Everything he takes must be prepared here. We will take him into our own hands."

Mary grew pale with the contagion of her sister's excitement. "Do you think," she said in a terrified whisper, "that she will try such a dreadful thing again?"

"Those who do it once may do it a hundred times," said Agnes, with the solemnity of a popular belief. "I feel as if I were living in an enemy's camp; but you and I will save the boy."

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Letty came stealing into the ante-room as soon as she was up, which was between seven and eight in the morning, she was received by Miss Hill with a stern countenance, to the double surprise of the anxious girl, who did not know she was in the house, nor that the kind Aunt Agnes, in whom she had claimed a share for years, could look forbidding.

"Oh, you are here!" Letty said, with a little shriek of pleasure. "He will get all right now you are here."

"Why should he get well now I am here?" cried Agnes, with a gloom of suspicion which Letty did not understand. "Was there anything wrong?"

The girl echoed the "wrong!" with a wondering face. "The nurses were very, very kind," she said, "but one wants to have some-

body one is fond of. They would not let me be here."

"Are you fond of him?"

"I——oh," said Letty, with a flush of generous feeling, "how can you ask me that? Fond of Mar? Duke and I and Tiny would die for Mar — if that would do him any good."

"I think you are true," said Agnes meditatively; "you're too young to be in any plot. Then you can help me, Letty. You must have everything brought up here—the meat for his beef-tea, even the water, fresh drawn. You must see to it yourself. I am going to prepare everything for him myself here."

Letty promised with enthusiasm. She was so anxious to do something that the commission delighted her for the first moment. Then she began to reflect involuntarily. "But why? Oh, I'm afraid cook will be dreadfully offended. She thinks so much of her beef-tea. Doesn't he like it? Did nurse say anything——"

"I wish to prepare everything here," said Agnes, in the stern tone which was so new to her, and Letty, much troubled and cast down, stole away. She was hardly gone when the

other nurse appeared, fresh and neat, from her night's sleep.

"Have you had a good night?" she said; "and how is——" She started and drew back at the sight of the stranger. "Has anything happened?" she said.

"Only that his mother is with the patient, and I am his aunt. We will take charge of him in future," said Agnes stiffly. There were aspects in which she was a grim old spinster, as the young men said.

The nurse stared, the cheerful nurse, who had always hoped, always believed in the boy's recovery. Agnes knew no difference between the woman who had slept all the night, and this bright daylight creature who had served him like a sister. She had been busy collecting what things she should want, preparing for the charge she had taken upon her when the nurse entered the room, and now went on with these preparations calmly, putting coals upon the fire and collecting the glasses and dishes which had been used to be carried away.

"You are making a large fire for such a warm day," said the nurse in her astonishment.

"I shall want it," said Agnes curtly.

"Let me do that, it is my business—and there is no hurry. I must first see my patient——"

"Nurse, I mean no discourtesy to you—but he is our patient now. His mother and I have taken the nursing into our own hands."

The nurse stared in consternation. "Does Mrs. Parke know?" she asked, helpless in the extremity of her surprise.

"Mrs. Parke has little to do with it. His mother, Lady Frogmore, is with him, and I am here to help her. We wish to do everything ourselves."

"But——" gasped the nurse. She added after a moment, "You are dissatisfied with the nursing——?"

It was a struggle with Agnes not to bring forward the failure of the other nurse; but she was honourable and just, and shut her mouth close lest she should betray her. "I cannot say that," she said, "for we have not been here. It is only natural that his mother—— And then I prefer to prepare everything for him myself."

"To prepare everything! You must think, then, there is some reason—— Oh, here is Mr. Parke!"

That was a wonder, too; for John Parke was not an early man. And he was very pale, and looked as if he too had been up all night. As a matter of fact it was so many hours since he had been there before in the glow of the summer night which was morning, yet too early for any one to be astir, that it seemed to him as to Agnes as if the day were already far spent. He came in looking as he had done when their anxiety was the deepest, with a cloud upon his face, and his hands deep in his pockets.

"You will take your orders from Miss Hill, nurse," he said, "and Lady Frogmore. It is natural that his mother—— And my wife will not, I think, come downstairs to-day. She is asleep now, but she has had a bad night."

"I am afraid, sir," said the nurse, "Mrs. Parke has been doing too much."

John Parke gave Agnes a troubled, alarmed, inquiring look, yet with a menace in his eyes as if to silence her. "Probably it's that," he said. And then, presently, after a pause, "It couldn't be the fever. It's not contagious? At least, that's what you people say."

"It's not contagious; but several attacks sometimes come on in one house. May I go and see Mrs. Parke?"

"We'll wait a little," said John; "we'll wait till the doctor comes. She is a little confused in her head." He fixed his eyes upon Agnes with a great deal of meaning. "I scarcely think she knew what she was doing —last night."

These were words that seemed so charged with meaning as to affect the air differently from other words. There seemed a little thrill in the atmosphere when they were said. And the pause that came after them was not like other pauses. There was a vibration in it of mystery and terror. And yet there was not one of the little group who quite understood what it meant. Agnes was in all the excitement of an incident which she was not at all sure was true, while John had nothing but a horrible doubt in his mind, and did not know what it was he feared. And the nurse knew nothing at all, but yet divined something perhaps more terrible than reality, if there was any reality at all. What was the mistress of the house doing last night, for which her

husband gloomily said that she was not responsible? But this no one dared to say.

Mary came out at this moment from the inner room. There was nothing in her of either horror or mystery. Her gray hair was a little disordered, curling in stray locks over the black veil which she had tied upon her head; her complexion quite fresh, with its soft rose-tint unaffected by the night's vigil; and her eyes full of light. Lady Frogmore had always possessed pretty eyes, they were the chief beauty of her face; not very bright, but always softly shining and luminous. For many years there had been, save on remarkable occasions, a sort of veil over them, a look as if they were turned inward. Now they were fully aglow, lit like two stars with a lambent quivering light. A look of supreme satisfaction and content was upon her face.

"He has taken his drink," she said, "and gone to sleep again, like a baby. He will probably now have a long sleep. Sleep is better for him than anything. John, we invaded your house last night like a couple of thieves, after dark. I had not time to ask for you or anything. I came upstairs at once,

knowing I was wanted, and arrived here—just in time."

"What do you mean by arriving just in time?" said John Parke, with an awful shadow coming over his face.

"I mean," said Mary, with a soft little laugh, "neither too early nor too late — just when I was wanted; and if you ask me how I knew that I was wanted I could not tell you. These things are mysterious. I came just at the moment——"

What moment? There was a curdling in the blood of the spectators, but none in Mary. All the horror had died away; she could think of nothing but the opportuneness of her own arrival. Perhaps she had forgotten even what it was which she had stopped "in time."

After that extraordinary thrill of silence John Parke spoke again in a voice which quivered strangely. "I came to tell you," he said, "that Letitia is ill."

"Ah!" said Mary. And she added gravely, "I do not wonder," with sudden seriousness; but there was nothing more in her gentle countenance; no anger; no fear.

The nurse, who was the least enlightened

of all, yet the most eager, the most full of surmises, said with anxiety, yet timidity, "Mrs. Parke has been so anxious. She has taken so much out of herself."

"Yes, I am afraid she has been very anxious," said Mary, still with that mild, yet strange seriousness. "It was, perhaps, very natural—in the circumstances."

"She was afraid lest anything should be neglected, and so anxious for every help that could be thought of—everything that the doctor or we could suggest."

The others listened silent to this plea. Nobody spoke. If Mary remembered what had happened, or if she consciously and willingly put it out of her mind, nobody could tell. She nodded her head several times in silent assent. Then she spoke, her companions all listening as if to the voice of fate.

"I understand that," she said, "and then at the very last—it was the over-strain at the last."

What did she mean? Even Agnes asked herself this question, wondering over again whether it was all a dream, or whether it was true. John Parke stood amid the group of

women, with his heart as heavy as lead, his ears keen to hear any word that could throw light on the mystery. But none came. Was there any mystery at all? Was it a mere encounter between the mother who was happy, and the mother who was (God forgive her!) disappointed — but no more? He stood for some minutes, waiting, terrified, yet eager to hear — and then unsatisfied, yet painfully relieved, as if he had escaped a sentence of death, walked away.

The doctor came afterwards, and pronounced the highest panegyric upon Mar. He had done exactly what it was best and wisest for him to do. He had slept, he had swallowed obediently all that was given him, and gone to sleep again. There now remained nothing for him but to be promoted to the disused practices of eating, and to go on. Dr. Barker, like an elated and successful practitioner, who is aware that great honour and glory will result to himself from the happy issue of this difficult case, freely applauded everybody, even the melancholy culprit, who was a woman of the keenest conscience, and could scarcely be kept from denouncing herself. The nurses, he said,

were half the battle, and he had been most ably seconded. And he was ready even to agree, without the faintest idea of her meaning or any curiosity on the subject, in Mary's happy assertion that she had arrived "just in time." "Precisely," the doctor said, "just when your appearance was the most invaluable stimulant —just when he was able to profit by it. I agree with you entirely, Lady Frogmore, you came in the nick of time."

It was considered very strange in the house, accustomed to appeal to the doctor in these constant visits of his if a finger ached, that he did not see Mrs. Parke that day. John expected that she was asleep, and that it was possible she might be quite well when she woke, and Dr. Barker left the house thinking that there were too many women about, and that they were an excitable lot, as women usually were, making as much fuss about that boy as if his getting well were a miracle; whereas he (Dr. Barker) had always been certain that with proper care the boy would get well. He was not a pessimist, but always ready to think the best. And, indeed, Dr. Barker, though he did not fail to dwell upon Mar's recovery as

a wonderful proof of what science could do ["for we had no constitution to work upon, no constitution, and everything against us"], dismissed the boy otherwise from his mind and fixed his thoughts wonderingly upon Mary, who seemed to have come out of her hallucination or mania, or whatever it was, at a moment's notice in the most astonishing way. It was as if she had always been there, always anxious about him, caring for him. And Dr. Barker smiled at her idea that she was just in time. He had observed it though he had not said anything, and put it down in a mental note-book as a curious evidence of the delusions which still linger in a mind that once has been off its balance. Mary had made an immense advance by recognising her boy, and this mild little extravagance of thinking she had come "just in time"—poor thing—showed how the wind was blowing; how her mind had been affected by the supposed imminence of a crisis. He put it down in his mind as a thing to note, when other patients were similarly affected. The reader knows that the doctor was wrong; but so are a great many, both doctors and other wise people, who take the reverberation of

an accidental fact for the foundation of an all-embracing theory—from which many strange things sometimes arrive.

Agnes Hill enacted what she herself came to think afterwards a somewhat ridiculous part for the rest of this day. She had everything that could be wanted for the sick-room brought upstairs in what may be called a rude form; pieces of beef and kettles of water destined to make Mar's beef-tea, and everything else that could be thought of, so that the ante-room resembled an amateur kitchen, filled with a score of things that could be made no use of, and which the indignant cook sent up in quantities, lest the ladies should want anything. A fire sufficient to cook by in the height of summer is not a comfortable thing. And still less was the condition of mind comfortable in which Miss Hill sat watching, afraid to rest or to admit any alleviation, tolerating with difficulty the presence of the nurse who, deeply interested and curious, addressed all her faculties to the task of finding out what was meant by these precautions. The food that had been sent up from the kitchen had been very dainty; it could not be because of any imperfection in

that; and the nurse smiled at the thought that she could be supposed to have been careless in the warming or preparation of anything. What then was the meaning of it? When her colleague in her agony of compunction confided the story of her dreadful failure, of the sleep that had lasted all night, and the cordial that had presumably caused it, a strange gleam of light came into the mystery. Mrs. Parke had been in the sick-room when the night nurse had fallen asleep, and when she awoke in the morning Lady Frogmore was there, and Lady Frogmore had asserted again and again that she had arrived "just in time." It seemed a wonderful gleam of light, yet on the whole it did not reveal much. What had happened, what Mrs. Parke had done, what Lady Frogmore had found, what had taken place while the legitimate guardian slept, could only be guessed, and dimly guessed. The nurse formed a theory in her own mind not further from the truth than a theory unattended by actual foundations of fact usually is—much more the truth than Dr. Barker's conclusion as to the rags of delusion which remain in the mind when its greater trouble

is gone. But it was a theory which Nurse Congreve, of the Ridding Hospital, kept closely to herself. A nurse, like a doctor, sees many strange chapters of family history —and among them this was the most strange; but that was all that could be said.

The most curious thing was that before the day was half over, Lady Frogmore, coming into the ante-room and finding it impossible to rest there as she had intended, on account of the dreadful heat, suddenly fell into a fit of suppressed laughter at her sister's *batterie de cuisine*, and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

"What is all that for?" she said. "And do you think, Agnes, that you can make things for him better than the cook?"

Miss Hill gave her sister a look full of reproach, but Lady Frogmore still laughed.

"The cook is a *cordon bleu*, and you will be melted away before that fire."

"Mary!" said Agnes, in a tone which meant a hundred things.

But before the time came, which was very soon, when Mar was allowed his first chicken, even Agnes' resolution had broken down, and

she began to be uncomfortably conscious that to this almost tragedy there was a ludicrous side. Lady Frogmore was the wonder of wonders during all this time. She was never tired, went without sleep night after night, and only looked the brighter in the morning; every cloud departed from her serene countenance, her eyes were lighted up with love and joy. To hear her say "my boy" was like listening to a song of triumph. It was she who shielded the night nurse from herself, and sent daily messages of inquiry about Letitia. When a day or two had elapsed she made no further mention of having arrived in time. Every appearance of having been injured, or terrified, or threatened, died out of her face. She became as she had been in the old days when she first came to the Park as Lady Frogmore, but more assured, more self-possessed, like a woman above the reach of fate.

Meanwhile the centre of interest changed in the house. It was Letitia's room which was occupied by the nurses, shadowed from the sunshine and daylight, and filled with anxious cares. The half of the county was aroused by

the news that Mrs. Parke, in her devotion to her nephew, and constant attendance upon him, had contracted the same fever, and now lay between life and death.

CHAPTER XVII

THE condition of mind of Mrs. John Parke when she escaped from the hands of Lady Frogmore was one which no words of mine could describe. And yet her excitement was scarcely greater then than it had been during all that day. The extraordinary and awful discovery of the morning, that Mar was not going to die, that all her hopes were fallacious, and she and her children doomed to insignificance for ever, had so unsettled her mind, which was fixed in a contrary idea, that in the storm and passion which possessed her soul she was scarcely responsible for her actions. To say this is a long way from saying that she was mad, and not responsible for her actions at all. Letitia was mad with passion, with contradiction, with the dreadful destruction of all her dreams—and when there came

whirling into her soul like a burning arrow the horrible suggestion that was murder, she did not seem to have leisure or power to think of it, to consider it, much more to reject it and cast it out of her, but only to feel keenly penetrated by it, transfixed, so that the mad confusion became more terrible still, and the writhing of her spirit more convulsive from this painful dart, which went through and through her. She seemed to obey some command that had been given to her when she went with what seemed premeditation to the shop in the street of the little town where she had gone to call on her friend. There was no time to think, only to do. All the evening she was in this hurried, breathless state. She had to sit down at the dinner table, to answer questions, to talk and look like her usual self; and then when she escaped upstairs, pretending she was tired, there was still no time, no time to think. She gave the nurse the potion, not sure whether that was not the thing that would destroy, while the other emptied into the innocent milk was nothing at all, a mere restorative. She did not know which was which. What did it matter? There

was no time to think. Thus, when Mary seized her, it was but the climax of a miserable day, a day which had been all one rush from morning to night.

And then the stuff was spilt between them. It was a good thing the stuff was spilt—all spilt and useless on the floor except a little which went upon her dressing-gown. Milk makes a stiff mark, hardens the stuff it stains, as if it were blood. Mary jumped back to save her gray gown. Oh, she did not mean to have her gray silk spoiled whatever happened, which was so like Mary. And then Letitia had got away. Nobody had seen it one way or the other, or knew anything about it except Mary. And what was there to know? Nothing! the stuff was spilt — there was nothing — nothing! She had done no harm—absolutely no harm. What was there to know? On the whole it had relieved her heart and her breathing when the stuff was spilt; she would not have liked to drink it as Mary tried to make her. No, she would not have drunk it; but when it was spilt, that was all right again. The only thing she regretted was that it did not splash up upon Mary's gown.

She would have liked to spoil that Quakerish dress. It would have been a satisfaction. And she did not meet a creature as she went back to her room. John was not there. Nobody need know that she had ever been out of it. To be sure there were Mary and Agnes—but they would not say anything. It was all one; Mar must live, and all her hopes must die—but at all events no one could say that she had harmed him. Never, never! she had not harmed him. She was even capable of falling asleep in her exhaustion, and had a succession of dreams or dozes. She did not know what was going on till it was light, till the morning had begun, and then she jumped up and went and looked out at the sky, feverishly anxious to know whether it was fine or whether it rained, though this was of no importance to any one; and then she had sent John to Mary, thinking it best to have the catastrophe over, whatever it should be—and then went to bed again and fell asleep, deep asleep, lying like a log through all those brilliant morning hours.

Who it was who said first that Letitia had the fever, that she had caught it in her de-

votion to her nephew, no one ever knew. It was the kind of rumour which rises by itself. She was ill and in bed, and what so natural as that the fever, which is always popularly believed to be contagious, whatever the instructed may say, should have seized another victim? The housemaids were extremely nervous whether they might not themselves be the next to be stricken, and half the county sent to inquire with a depth of interest which was intensified by the fact that Mrs. John Parke had not been up to this time a popular woman. The ladies in the neighbourhood said to each other that they had done her injustice, that they never had supposed her capable of such devotion, and sent their grooms to inquire with even greater interest than they had shown for young Lord Frogmore; and whenever John was met he was overwhelmed with inquiries and bidden to keep up his spirits and hope the best, for if young Frogmore, so delicate a boy, had recovered, why not Mrs. Parke? John, everybody said, looked ten years older, and that too was a revelation to his neighbours; for it had never been supposed that he was so sensitive or so romantically

attached to his wife that even a possibility of danger to her should move him so much. Dr. Barker, it was remarked, did not look by any means so grave. He said brusquely that she would do very well, that it was not nearly so bad a case as that of Lord Frogmore, and his visits were much less frequent than they had been during Mar's illness. But even with all the superior sources of information which we possess, it is difficult to tell at what time it entered into Letitia's mind that it would be a good thing to have the fever. She was capable of no such thought at first when she woke from that heavy sleep of exhaustion, and found her husband waiting for her awakening, waiting to question her, to catch her off her guard, to discover the meaning that had been in Mary's words. But Letitia's first glance at John's face had put her on her guard. She had woke refreshed and strengthened by the consciousness which felt like superior virtue, that Mar had taken no harm; and all her forces rallied to answer John, to bewilder and beguile him. His face was full of perplexity—he had got no light on what had happened, and every nerve must be strained, Letitia felt, to settle the question now

and for ever. She answered with a skill and coolness which would have been the admiration of any lawyer, his heavy cross-examination. He was not clever, poor fellow, he did not know what questions to ask; he asked the same questions again and again. He continued to show his own troubled thoughts, and the vague dread in his mind, rather than to get any light upon the mystery. But though she was so clever and he so much the reverse, it soon became apparent to Letitia that for the first time he was not convinced by the most specious explanations. She told him a story which fitted well enough and made it all clear. There were no joints in her armour, nothing at least of which he could take advantage—it was all quite coherent, hanging together. There was not a word to be said against it. But John was not convinced, the cloud did not lift from his face. Instead of the look of confidence he was wont to give her, the "Ah, now I see what you mean," which had so often been the reward of Letitia's explanations, he sat heavily, staring at her, and found nothing to say. He could not object to anything, but he was not convinced. It was a new thing in their life.

Perhaps it was then, in the evening of that day, when her own excitement had calmed down, when she had succeeded in impressing upon herself as a thing that had been almost beyond hoping for, the highest testimony to her own virtues, that Mar had taken no harm—that the idea of having the fever came into Letitia's busy brain. All this excitement had told upon her, and the terrible shock of last night which, to do her justice, was as much caused by the dreadful sensation of having done that terrible thing, as of having been found out. She was not well. She found with satisfaction that her pulse was high and her breathing quick. She was feverish and excited, her whole being conscious of the tremendous crisis through which she had passed. And to meet Mary was beyond even Letitia's power. She was able for many things, but she did not feel herself able for that. It seemed to her that to remain in bed under any plausible pretext, to lie there at her ease, and repose herself, would be the greatest comfort she could think of. Her head did ache, her pulse was quick, the agitation which had not subsided in her mind counterfeited not badly the

bodily agitation of fever. It was enough to deceive the nurse who came to her reluctantly, but whom she soon subdued to her service, and if it did not subdue Dr. Barker it was enough to make him consent to her assumption. It was herself who suggested gradually and with caution that she had caught it from young Frogmore. She said:

"Let no one come near me; you all say there is nothing contagious in it; but how could I have got it but from Mar? Therefore, keep the children away from me, keep the servants out of the room. No one must run any risk for me."

"Mamma, mamma," cried Letty, at the locked door, "let me come in. I must come in and help to nurse you."

Letitia smiled with a pathetic look which altogether overcame the nurse. She went to the door and addressed the applicant outside.

"Miss Letty, your dear mamma will not allow me to let you in. She says, seeing she has caught it from Lord Frogmore, you might catch it too; and you must not come in."

"Oh, what do I care for catching it!" cried

Letty, beating upon the door. "Let me in, let me come in!"

But Letitia was inexorable. John was allowed to come in, morning and evening. John, who never got free from that cloud on his face, who stood at a little distance from the bed, and looked at his wife while he asked his little formula of questions. "If she had had a good night—how her pulse was—what the doctor thought." He was anxious and unfailing in his visits, but the cloud never departed from his face. Not even the fact that she had taken the fever convinced John. It softened him, indeed, and mingled pity with the painful perplexity in which his mind was left, which was something in her favour; but it was not enough to restore the confidence which was lost.

Thus the great house presented a very curious spectacle with its two centres of illness —on one side full of brightness and hope, on the other of dark and troublous thoughts. Mar was recovering moment by moment—they could see him getting better—thriving, brightening, expanding like a flower. And the room, in which Agnes no longer attempted to cook for him, was full of the cheerfullest voices,

to which his young, tremulous bass—for his boyish voice had broken, and was now portentously mannish and deep, notwithstanding his weakness—would respond now and then with a happy word, which Letty and Tiny received with delight and admiration, accepting even his jokes with acclamation in their gratitude to him for getting well. They told each other stories now of the dreadful time of his illness, and especially of that day when they had given up hope, which was the day on which Agnes had received her letter, the day which preceded the change, which had been so wonderful a change in many ways.

"But I never gave up hope," cried Tiny, "neither I nor nurse."

"Oh," cried Letty, "you shut yourself up all the morning in your room. You would do no lessons or anything; and when I went to your door to call you, you could not hear me, for you were sobbing as if your heart would break; and nurse, though she always said there was hope, cried when she said it."

"I cried because I could not help it, but I always believed he would get better," said the nurse.

It was the cheerful nurse, she who had always hoped, who still kept partial charge of Mar, while the other one who had fallen asleep on that eventful night had gone to Mrs. Parke.

This conflict of eager voices touched and amused the two ladies, who had no thought in the world but how to humour, and please, and strengthen Mar. Mary laid her hand on Tiny's shoulder, and said to her sister, "It must be this child, for the other is too old." For what was it that Letty at nineteen was too old? But Agnes was not so easily moved. She shook her head a little. She loved the children; but Letitia's blood was in their veins, and who could tell when or how it might come out?

And the curious thing was that between Lady Frogmore and her son there was such a perfect understanding and union, as mother and child who have been all in all to each other do not always reach. Mary's mind had never been disturbed by fears that her boy might reject her tardy love, or might have been alienated from her. It was part of the change that her illness and permanent confusion of

mind had wrought in her. She who had been so humble was now troubled with no doubts of herself. From the moment when the cloud rolled away, a soft and full sunshine of revival and certainty had come into Mary's mind. She had not felt herself guilty towards her boy, and she had never doubted that his heart would meet hers with all the warmth of nature. It was as if she had come home from a long, involuntary absence. Had she ever forgotten him, put him aside, shrank from the sight of him? She did not believe it, or rather she never thought of it, rejecting every such thought and image. She never called him by the name of Mar as the others did. Some painful association, she could not tell what, was in the name. She called him "my boy" in a voice which was like that of a dove, and then with a firmer tone "Frogmore." "It is time," she said, "that he bore his father's name." And she made no allusion to the past, never a word to show that she remembered the long years of separation. Even in her conversation with her sister when they were alone together, Mary altogether avoided the subject. To say that Agnes did not try to

fathom the extraordinary change, and make out how it was that such a revolution should be possible, would be to suppose her strangely unlike the rest of the human race. Her mind was full of curiosity and wonder, but it was never satisfied.

Lady Frogmore never seemed to remember that things had been different in the past. She spoke of Frogmore's room at the Dower House as if there had always been such a room.

"I think we must have all the furniture renewed," she said; "he wants a man's surroundings now. He must have new bookcases, and room for all his things."

Agnes was so overawed by her sister's steadfast ignoring of all that was different in the past, that she did not even dare to ask which was Frogmore's room. She had to divine which room was meant, and to carry out her orders without a question more.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I AM very glad," said the man of business, "to hear that everything has gone so well." He gave John a somewhat curious look from under his eyelids. He did not doubt the honest meaning of his co-trustee; but that there should have been for so long before Mr. Parke's eyes the prospect of such a change—the almost certainty that the delicate boy would die, and title, wealth, and importance — every advancement he had ever dreamed — should come to him; and then in a moment that the whole brilliant prospect should be wiped out, and himself and his children thrust back into the shade—was an ordeal which would try the best. It was impossible but that the thought of it must have entered John's mind. He must have felt himself again heir presumptive; he must have believed that a few hours would

restore to him all and more than he had lost. And then all had disappeared again, and by an event at which John must pronounce himself glad. It was a severe trial for any man. Mr. Blotting attributed to this the cloud upon John Parke's face, and was sorry, but could not blame him. It was but too natural that he should feel so. His wife's illness, too, the astute man of business could easily enough conceive to spring from the same cause. She, no doubt, had felt it still more keenly than John had done. He had seen the doctor, and was aware that Dr. Barker did not treat Mrs. Parke's fever as very serious; and the lawyer had his own ideas of human nature, which seemed to him to account for many things. He would have treated with the supremest contempt any suggestion that either one or the other had thought a thought, much less lifted a finger to the detriment of their charge; but it could not be expected that they should in their hearts welcome the restoration to health of this young supplanter as if he had been their son.

"Blotting," said John Parke, "I have something very serious to say to you. Do you

know that Lady Frogmore has come entirely to herself? She has not only fully recognised and acknowledged her son, but she seems to have forgotten that she ever did otherwise. Barker says it is what he always hoped—that a great shock some time would bring her completely back."

"But do you think it will last?" said the lawyer, shaking his head.

"He thinks it will last—he is a better authority than I am. Well! she was to be the guardian, you know, and all we did has been done by private arrangement between ourselves to save public discussion—and may be changed in the same way."

"I can't think what you are driving at," Mr. Blotting said.

"Oh, it is easy enough to understand. I don't wish to resume the charge of the boy, Blotting, especially now when it will be full of embarrassments. His mother would always be interfering. I don't deny her right. But it was only because she was disabled that I took it at all, don't you know. I want to give it up now. I want to leave this house. Don't you see it puts us in a false position living here?

My children will suffer from it. They get exaggerated ideas of their own importance. They're of no particular importance," said John, with perhaps a faint bitterness in his tone, "and it's very bad for them. There was all that fuss about Duke, for instance. I didn't think of it at the time, but it was highly absurd. It was calculated to give the boy the most false idea——"

"We—ell," said the co-trustee. He could not contradict this, which was certainly the truth, and had been remarked by everybody. "Perhaps there may be something in what you say; but that boy of yours is a capital fellow, Parke. How cleverly he brought his cousin in and set things on their right footing!"

John did not for a moment reply. It is always pleasant to hear your son praised, but when he is praised for seeing further and showing better sense than yourself, it is perhaps not so pleasant. Mr. Parke had thought a great deal since those recent events, and had seen many things in a different light. Amid other things those festivities, in which Duke was the hero, now appeared to him in the light of an almost incredible piece of folly. He was

glad to think that he had remonstrated at the time, but his remonstrances (which he did not now remember had been very feeble) were overborne. All the same he did not quite like it when his colleague so readily agreed. It would have been civil at least to say that nobody else thought so, and that it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Well!" he said sharply, in a very different tone from that lingering monosyllable which expressed so unflattering an acquiescence in his own self-reproach. "We agree, you see, so far as that is concerned. And I am anxious to get back to my own house. Greenpark is our home, not this place, which belongs to my nephew. Now that his mother is quite restored she is the right person to make a home for him. There never can be any question as to her motives."

"Parke! there never has been, so far as I am aware, the slightest question as to your motives."

John waved his hand; he did not speak. Was it, perhaps, that he was not capable of doing so? He stood for a moment without saying anything, and then went on:

"Anyhow, it would be better for us all. One gets to think one has a right to things of which one has only the use. I don't like it for the children. I am anxious to get home. And our tenants there are going: their time is up. I should like it to be settled at once. It was between you and me before, an amicable arrangement. Now we can return to the original letter of the will, don't you know? Mary must be the acting guardian as he wished. My brother," John said with a faint sigh, which he endeavoured to restrain, "had the most perfect confidence in his wife."

"Talking of that," said Mr. Blotting, "I hope, if you will allow me to say so, that you are not taking this important step without talking it over with Mrs. Parke. I know she is ill——"

"My wife and I are entirely of the same mind," said John hastily. "I know her opinion," he added, hesitating. "Lady Frogmore and she could not get on in the same house. They are very old friends, and there is a long-standing grievance——"

The lawyer laughed, as wise men do when the female element comes in. He thought he had now the key to the situation.

"Ah," he said, "I understand! the ladies are like that—very charming, but apt to have grudges, and hating each other like poison. They are all more or less like that."

It seemed to John, in his momentary exasperation, as if he would have liked to knock his fellow-trustee down. To treat his sombre misery as if it had no deeper origin than a trivial quarrel! And yet it was the kindest thing that could have been done. He said to himself, with a rebound of the habitual affection he had for his wife, and sense that her credit was his, that Letitia, whatever she might be, was no fool. Blotting's women might be idiots like that, but she was not. He had the deepest horror for her fault (whatever it was) in his own heart, and sometimes could hardly bear to speak to her from thought of what she had done. But he could not let another man touch her, or point a finger of scorn at her. Whatever Letitia might be she was his, and she was no fool.

Mrs. Parke recovered slowly, and for weeks the avenue was traversed by files of inquirers with the cards of all the best people about. And it seemed the most natural thing in the

world that as soon as she was able she should be taken to her own home at Greenpark for change of air. Lady Frogmore had already gone, taking her son with her to her dower house. It was said that there was something wrong with the drains at the great house, as there is in so many great establishments, and that after two cases of fever they must at once be seen to. In the commotion caused by this it need scarcely be said that the cottages at Westgate were forgotten, and continued till Mar's majority to be the most picturesque group of dwellings and the most poisonous centre of infection in the parish. Even when that time came it was almost too much for all the romantic people about to see them pulled down. The Park stood empty for a year or two, however, neither young Lord Frogmore nor his former guardian coming back; but as there were various very natural reasons for this, few questions were asked or remarks made. The young lord went abroad with his mother for some time, and when he returned he went to Oxford, which was what he had never been expected to be able for. But a fever is often rather

a good thing when it is over, clearing away incipient mischief and settling the constitution. I do not venture to answer for this doctrine, but it was believed by all the servants and village people, who had now changed their opinion as to the practicability of "raring" Mar. By means of the changed treatment to which he was subjected, if not to the settling influence of his fever, he grew so strong that his unusual height seemed to be no drawback to him, and he was not without distinction in the records of his college in matters of athletic success, as well as in other ways.

When Mar reached his majority the festivities rivalled those of a similar period in the history of Duke, his cousin, but were not so imposing. And it was not very long after that great epoch when Lady Frogmore and her constant companion had an announcement made to them which was not unexpected, yet which it must be allowed they had done their best to avert. The reader, perhaps, will have divined what Mary meant when she laid her hand upon the shoulder of her little namesake, Mary Parke — still called Tiny by all her surroundings, though now Tiny no more—

and said, "It must be this one, for Letty is too old." And perhaps that experienced reader will also divine that Lady Frogmore's conclusion, possibly by mere force of the fact that it was her conclusion, proved wrong. I do not attempt to say anything to excuse the disadvantage of Letty's age; two years is no doubt a very serious matter when it occurs early in the twenties. But this may be alleged in extenuation, that Mar was very much grown up, almost elderly for his age. He was more like five-and-twenty than one-and-twenty, everybody said. His upbringing, which was on the whole somewhat solitary, and his delicate health as a boy, and the many thoughts into which his peculiar position and circumstances led him, were calculated to mature the mind. And young Frogmore felt himself quite the eldest member of the family when he came back with his degree (in modest honours) a year after his majority, and found his mother and his aunt ready to worship him for being so clever, for being so strong, for having such good health, and for wearing the ribbon of his college eleven. They were not quite certain, at least Mary was not, for which

of these things she was most grateful to her boy; but I myself have no doubt upon the subject. It was for being so well that she admired him most.

And the first thing he told them was—that it was Letty. Not her sister, whom Lady Frogmore had selected as most suitable in point of age, but the elder of the two, who was and had always been two years older than Mar. These ladies were so full of the primitive prejudices of their kind that they did not like it. But then they liked Letty, which was much better. She was Letitia's child; but though Agnes still remembered that, she no longer feared that the mother's blood would show. Mary on her side had, notwithstanding everything, a satisfaction which made her fair life all the fairer in the thought that her marriage and her child's birth were not altogether, after all, injurious to the family of her old friend.

All the events of the dreadful period before the John Parkes' retirement to their own house happily faded out of human knowledge in the course of these years. They were better off than they had been in their beginning, from

various causes—because for one thing they had been able to make considerable savings during their residence at the Park as guardians to young Lord Frogmore, and because old Lord Frogmore had made some important additions to their means before his death, and their children were well put out in the world and prospered. But there was one thing which amid this prosperity never changed. John Parke never recovered the confidence in his wife which had been shattered on that July morning. It was never known what she had done, and indeed he forgot that she had done anything as the years went on; but she was no longer to him the infallible guide, the unerring counsellor of the past. His faith had been destroyed; he took her advice often, and what was more, he left most things to her guidance by habit and indolence as he had always done. But he did not believe in her as he had once done—that was over. It is a thing that has had few consequences, because as I have said of the indolence which grows with years and habit, which is much stronger than opinion. But, a thing almost as remarkable as John's want of faith, Letitia felt it, though it had

so few practical results. She felt it more than she had ever felt anything impalpable in all the course of her life. It made very little difference externally, but yet she felt it to the bottom of her heart. And she for one never forgot those occurrences which destroyed her husband's faith in her. So far as could be known, they had altogether passed from the recollection of Lady Frogmore, but Letitia never forgot. She gave the incident a twist, however, which made it a matter to talk about, and even to exult over, by one of the strangest distortions of thought ever recorded. There was nothing she was so fond of talking of as the tremendous responsibility that had been laid upon her when John undertook the charge of Frogmore. "For it is easy talking," Mrs. Parke would say, "about John undertaking it. What had John to do with the bringing up of a delicate boy? Of course it was me; and if ever there was a responsibility in this world which I should recommend everybody to avoid, it is the task of bringing up other people's children; and a very delicate boy, and one whose death would have been a positive advantage to us if anything had happened to him. Can you imagine

such a position? I would not undertake it again if the Queen were to ask me. It is a life-long subject of gratitude to me," Mrs. Parke would add with a sigh of satisfaction, "that he got no harm in my house."

And John listens to this over and over again repeated — and is never clear why it annoys him so. For events grow dim after the course of years—and he never did know what Letitia had done. Meanwhile it is and will remain for all her life Mrs. Parke's great subject of self-felicitation that Lord Frogmore never came to any harm while he remained under her care.

THE END

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